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A MAGNIFICENT YOUNG MAN

BY

John Strange Winter, pseud.

AUTHOR OF "BOOTLES' BABY," "AUNT JOHNNIE,"

"EVERY INCH A SOLDIER," "ONLY HUMAN,"

"THE OTHER MAN'S WIFE," ETC.

*Henrietta Eliza Vaughn (Palmer)
Stannard*



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A MAGNIFICENT YOUNG MAN.

CHAPTER I.

BLADENSBROOK OF BLADENSBROOK.

MRS. BLADENSBROOK was queen regent of the estate which bore the same name as she did. Whether the original possessor of Bladensbrook had taken his name from the soil, or whether the soil had taken its name from the original possessor, history does not record, but the Bladensbrooks of Bladensbrook had been powers in Blankshire for some hundreds of years, and when young Godfrey Bladensbrook, the last representative of the old family, was three years old his father was killed by a kick from one of his horses, and Mrs. Bladensbrook became for the time queen regent.

Godfrey the elder, the one who died from a kick of a horse, was a typical Bladensbrook, of immense size and great personal beauty, and with an upper storey less well furnished than any other part of him. The most astute thing that he had ever done in the whole of his thirty-six years of life was his marriage. He had not married for money,

nor had he gone where money was, but he had chosen a woman of undeniable position. Mrs. Bladensbrook was styled Honourable, the keen-brained daughter of an exceptionally keen-brained father, a peer who in his time had filled the highest offices in the land open to a subject, a woman of extraordinary acumen, who understood thoroughly—to use Godfrey Bladensbrook's own words—how many beans made five. Being herself irreproachable as to family, Mrs. Bladensbrook at once flung herself heart and soul into the traditions of the family into which she had married. She always spoke of the Bladensbrooks as if they were a race entirely and distinctly apart from the majority of people. In her estimation the upper classes in this country were divided into three—the Peerage, the Bladensbrooks, and the county families. “You must never forget,” she would say to her son, “that you were born a *Bladensbrook*.” By reason of this wholesale adoption of her husband's family, Mrs. Bladensbrook obtained and kept during the five years of her married life an absolute power over her husband. He worshipped her from first to last; he adored her. If they were parted for a few hours he was as a lost soul, as a needle without its pole; a boat without a rudder was truly an apt illustration of what Godfrey Bladensbrook was like when he was separated for ever so short a time from his wife. His opinion of her far-sighted shrewdness was immense, his belief that she would understand the most difficult accounts, advise him rightly in the most awkward situation, might be as

a tower of strength in the most trying circumstances, was as unshakable as it was genuine.

So after the fatal day when Godfrey Bladensbrook was found done to death by the hoofs of his own favourite hack, no one was surprised that he was found to have left a will naming his widow as his sole executor and the sole guardian of his only child, leaving her, in fact, queen regent over the Bladensbrook property, and over the last of the name. He had made no provision against his wife's marrying again, and Mrs. Bladensbrook's father was quick to notice it and to comment upon it. "I shall never marry again," said Mrs. Bladensbrook quietly; "all my interest in life will be to bring up my son to be as worthy of his name as his father was before him." "Quite right, my dear," said Lord Pollington approvingly; "I am very glad that you accept your responsibilities so thoroughly. They *are* responsibilities, and very grave ones, but you will be more than equal to them." In truth, Lord Pollington had always regarded the dead and gone Godfrey as a thoroughly good fellow who was as near an idiot as it was possible for an English gentleman to be; but of course there was no occasion to express that opinion in plain words to his widow.

For a little time people round about the neighbourhood of Bladensbrook discussed the new state of affairs, and even ventured on more or less lugubrious predictions concerning the future of the child and the care which would be taken of the property, but as Mrs. Bladensbrook had no one to

consider but herself, she did not trouble about what rumour might be saying, even if she ever knew it; still less did she trouble as to the opinion of others in the upbringing of her only child. From the very first she treated him as if he were a young king. She impressed a due sense of his responsibilities upon him, made him fully aware of the importance of his place in this world, and always treated him—even when correcting him—with a certain deference which she held due to the head of her family; and it must be remembered that young Godfrey was only three years old when his father died. From the day following that of Godfrey the elder's funeral, the young squire sat in his place, and was invariably spoken of and to as *Mr. Bladensbrook*. It was characteristic of this woman that she never called him Godfrey when speaking of him to anyone else, not even to people who were more than her social equals; she invariably said "My son." Sometimes, if she chanced to be speaking to a very great lady, she would soften it to "My little son," but to all people inferior to herself, she made a rule of calling him Mr. Bladensbrook.

She never *did* marry again. She held the reins of government with a firm yet easy hand. She neither rushed into undue extravagance nor curtailed expenses. In fact, she lived in precisely the same manner as she had lived during the five years of her husband's lifetime. During the first twelve months she did not entertain. She wore the deepest of widow's weeds, and accepted no invitations

whatever, but she always had three men servants to wait at dinner, and the dignified butler always stood behind "Mr. Bladensbrook's" chair at luncheon. At the end of the twelve months she relaxed her mourning and her seclusion, breaking the ice by going to a few small entertainments, and by giving several small dinner parties. At the end of two years she had laid aside her mourning, and entertained on precisely the same scale as she and her husband had been wont to do, with this exception—that she never gave hunt breakfasts as he had done.

So the years passed over, and young Godfrey Bladensbrook grew up. In some senses he had been very wisely governed. He had been fearlessly given over to the instructions of the coachman, the head groom, and the head gamekeeper. He had had the manliest tutor whom Mrs. Bladensbrook could hear of, and the result was that when he was old enough to go to Eton he knew most things that a boy should know of country life, and rode, drove, shot, and fished with any other boy of his age, was big and strong for his years, and quite as handsome as his father had been before him, was exceedingly sweet-tempered, and without being brilliant in the way of intellect, had certainly inherited a fair share of his mother's astuteness of character; and yet, he had been so hedged about, so guarded, so watched, so considered in every way, that in some respects he had grown up to be what other boys of his age called a "bit of an ass!" There were joys in the lives

of other lads which had never entered into his. His mother had never debarred him from seeing as much as was possible of the boys of his own class in the neighbourhood, but they were not many, and when he was with them he could scarcely understand their likings and dislikings any more than a grown-up man or woman might be able to do. He could not for the life of him see anything to go into ecstasies over in a filthy, evil-smelling ferret, guinea-pigs bored him to death and always had done, rabbits he would have none of, and white rats and mice were an abomination to him. "They stink so!" was his comment when the two lads at the Rectory took him to their own quarters adjoining the stables and proudly displayed to him all their live stock. "I can understand you thinking a lot about that fellow," pointing to a very well-bred bull-terrier who was standing by quivering with excitement on the chance of there being a rat-hunt on foot, "but these horrid, sinuous, ill-smelling ferrets I cannot see anything to like in!"

The two young Dangerfields, not knowing what *sinuous* meant, did not pursue the subject further, but led their guest on to the pen where the rabbits were. It was no use. Rabbits, white rats, white mice, guinea-pigs, all met with the same quiet disgust as the ferrets had done, and so the two lads looked at one another with a look which conveyed, "What an ass this chap is!" and suggested that perhaps he would like to go and see the pigs. The Dangerfield lads loved the pigs

themselves, and were on the most friendly relations with all of them. There was Mrs. Isaacs, a large black lady who spent the greater part of her days in hanging over the edge of her sty watching for the pail-full of steaming wash which filled her trough at certain hours. If Mrs. Isaacs was not standing on her hind legs watching for the pail, she was sure to be lying flat on her side basking in the hottest rays of the sun, or to be within the sty half buried in a heap of clean straw. These two lads loved Mrs. Isaacs. They simply could not understand the mind which could regard Mrs. Isaacs as an ordinary pig, and take no more interest in her than if she were one of the white sows down the village. On the other side of the yard was Mrs. Isaacs's last family,—nine small black persons, who also waited with great eagerness for the arrival of the wash-pail, but who had not yet attained to the height which permitted their mother to hang over the edge of her sty and look for it. Then a little further down was Mrs. Grundy. Mrs. Grundy was a younger lady than Mrs. Isaacs, and scarcely so advanced in worldly knowledge, but she was very dear to the two boys, and they spent many a ten minutes scratching away at the back of one or the other of them with an old stable broom. In an adjoining shed was a nine weeks' old calf, a wee, bonny thing that mistook everybody's fingers for feeding-bottles. Young Godfrey Bladensbrook did not conceal the fact that he strongly objected to fostering such an illusion. "They are so slobbery!" he said, as he watched

Jack Dangerfield standing patiently while the pretty brown animal sucked away at his two first fingers, "You will have to go and wash your hands now."

As a truthful chronicler I must confess that Jack Dangerfield laughed outright, and the next moment he wiped his fingers on the side of his trousers. first the inside, then the outside—"Oh, they are all right," he said; "it's clean enough, poor little thing."

Two stalls away was the mother of the calf, a patient Alderney cow, who apparently found life no small trial.

"What's she kicking up that row for?" asked young Godfrey. You see, he never went into his own farmyard; indeed, it was three miles away from the house, so perhaps he had not the same temptation to do so as the young Dangerfields.

"Oh, she's worrying after her calf. He has only been taken from her since yesterday or the day before, or some time or other. Poor Daisy," patting the bereaved mother upon the neck. "It is very hard on you to have your children taken away, isn't it? And the little chap's going to the butcher next week!"

Young Godfrey turned round and walked straight out of the shed. It was his first intimate introduction to the maternal joys and sorrows of the stockyard. He felt as if he could never touch veal again as long as he lived.

"You must come and see the donkey," said Jim Dangerfield, catching him by the arm.

"Oh, yes, where is the donkey?" He felt that a donkey would be comparatively harmless.

This donkey was, however, not quite harmless. He was a pet and went in a small governess cart, being most often driven by the Rector's little daughter Margot; but something happened to be wrong with Joko that day, and he made himself so intensely unpleasant that Jack and Jim escorted their young guest back to the front of the house in a state of mind akin to despair.

"Oh, here's Margot," said Jim, as they turned the corner by the drawing-room windows.

It was a glorious July day, and Margot, who was ten years old, was just coming out of the house by way of the conservatory. "Have you been round the yard?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Jack.

"I do think it's mean of you to go round the yard without me. You know I love going round. I call it horrid of you both."

"It *was* rather horrid," admitted Jim, "but you see we didn't know what to do with Godfrey here."

"You might have come to the foot of the stairs and shouted," said Margot, indignantly.

Now, one of the articles of faith in which Godfrey Bladensbrook had been brought up was excessive courtesy and attention towards womenkind. Although they had been intimately known to each other for years and years, ever since they had been little toddling children, so that the Dangerfields and young Bladensbrook were more like brothers and sister than neighbours, he took off his hat to

Margot as he would have taken it off to Her Majesty. Margot was very much flattered, and instantly attached Godfrey to herself, leaving her two older brothers to follow behind them.

"Have you seen everything?" she asked.

"I believe I have," said Godfrey, very politely, and scarcely able to repress a shudder of disgust.

"Did you see the ferrets?"

"Yes."

"And the guinea-pigs?"

"Yes."

"And the rats?"

"Yes."

"And the mice?"

"Yes."

"And the rabbits?"

"Yes."

"And the calf?"

"Yes."

"And the cow?"

"Yes."

"And the donkey?"

"Yes."

"You never went and showed *my* donkey?"

"I am afraid we did, Margot," said Jack, apologetically.

"You are afraid you did? Then I suppose you went and showed my kittens?"

"No, we forgot the kittens!" cried Jim and Jack in the same breath.

"Well, then, I will take you to see my kittens," said Margot, turning to Godfrey triumphantly.

CHAPTER II.

TOLD BY THE GIPSY.

It was brilliant summer weather once more. Nearly a year had gone by since the day on which the young Dangerfields had introduced Godfrey Bladensbrook to Mrs. Isaacs and the donkey, and since that time they had not met. All three boys had been at their respective schools, Godfrey at Eton, and Jim and Jack Dangerfield at Charterhouse. Godfrey had not come home to Bladensbrook for Christmas, his mother having spent the entire winter in the south of France, where he had joined her on his holidays beginning. The Easter vacation he had of course spent with her in London, and so it was with a sense of everything being to a certain extent strange that he found himself once more in his own kingdom.

He had reached home but barely in time to dress for dinner, and naturally he and his mother had much to say to each other during the first evening. The following day, too, he had more than enough to occupy him, improvements to see, different servants and workmen to speak to, to go through the stables and glass houses, and to hear a good deal of what his mother had been doing during his absence; and immediately after lunch the two lads from the Rectory arrived to bid him welcome home and to beg that he would come down and spend

the afternoon with them. On the whole, young Godfrey would rather have done nothing of the kind. He had had a good deal of boys' society at Eton, and would have preferred to drive with his mother and discuss several questions which were far more interesting to him than the Rectory ferrets; but Mrs. Bladensbrook, who never lost a chance of any course which she believed would give her boy's mind a right turn, took it for granted that he would prefer to spend the rest of the day with those of his own level rather than with her.

"Oh, Godfrey will be very pleased, won't you, Godfrey?" she said, as Jim preferred his request.

Whereupon Godfrey had practically no choice but to acquiesce in his mother's decision.

"I am going to make a call some miles away," Mrs. Bladensbrook went on, in her great lady fashion, "and shall not be back till nearly dinner-time, so you will not trouble about me, Godfrey."

"Not at all, Mother," said he. In truth, he never did trouble about his mother. He would have considered it rather an impertinence than otherwise to trouble about a lady who was so terribly well able to take care of herself as Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"If you would like Jim and Jack to come back to dinner with you, pray bring them," the lady went on; "Godfrey spend the afternoon with you, and you come up and dine with Godfrey."

"Oh, thank you awfully, Mrs. Bladensbrook," said Jack, who was more impulsive than Jim and sometimes spoke first.

"And be sure that you are here at a quarter to eight," Mrs. Bladensbrook continued.

"A quarter to eight? Yes, we will be here. And Margot, are we to bring Margot?" Jack asked.

"Oh, well, do you think that your mother will allow Margot to come?"

"Oh, I think Mother will allow it. You see, Margot is so dreadfully put out if she is left out of it in any way. I think if you don't *mind* our bringing Margot——"

"Very well, if your mother will allow Margot to come I shall be very pleased, and you can say that I will send you home in the carriage at ten o'clock."

"Very well, thank you awfully. Then we will be going along now, if you don't mind, Godfrey."

So the two carried Godfrey off in triumph between them. He was rather bored at the prospect of the ferrets, Mrs. Isaacs and the other pigs, to say nothing of any calves and other domestic animals that might be hanging about, but he was very fond of Margot, and the certainty that she would be there somewhat mitigated his feeling of unwillingness to have his original plans altered.

They found Margot under the great weeping elm, which shaded the lawn in front of the Rectory, swinging herself to and fro in a hammock in company with Dido, the pug, and two small pug puppies. As she caught sight of Godfrey she jumped up, upsetting herself, Dido, and the puppies on to the ground. "Oh, Godfrey, I didn't

really believe that you were coming back!" she exclaimed, holding out both her hands. "Why, it is *years* since you were here last!"

"Only *one* year," interrupted Godfrey.

"Only one year? *ten*—ten! I thought you were never coming back again. How horrid of you to go to France for your Christmas holidays. We were dreadfully dull without you. See, this is my pug, Dido, isn't she a beauty? And these are her pups. Father said I was absolutely insane to want to keep them both; he would have drowned them, but it would have been wicked to drown them, wouldn't it? They are such beauties."

"They *are* beauties," said Godfrey, who knew the points of a dog as well as most boys of his age.

"We have got all sorts of young things in the yard," Margot went on, looking at him out of a pair of brilliant hazel eyes, and having evidently no idea that his soul loathed ferrets and such like; "would you like to go round the yard now, Godfrey, or would you like to stay here under the tree? Or would you like to go and see if there are any strawberries? Or have you too many strawberries up at Bladensbrook? Or shall we go and see if Mrs. Wilson has got any cakes? I know she has cakes, for I was in the kitchen this morning, and saw them being made. They are little cakes, you know—'fat rascals'—with currants in. Wouldn't you like some of those, Godfrey?"

Godfrey sighed. He had just eaten an exceedingly good lunch, and did not feel that even fat rascals, whose quality was well known to him, were particularly desirable. However, his code of manners did not allow him to refuse the offering of a lady, so he assented to her proposal that they should pay a visit to the Rectory cook, and felt himself lucky that her heart's desire did not tend towards the ferrets. It was quite a new experience for the young squire to find himself going round to the kitchen entrance to gather largesse of the cook. In his own establishment if he had desired a plateful of fat rascals he would have rung the bell and ordered them, but on the principle of doing in Rome as the Romans do, he meekly went along kitchenwards with Margot, who calmly told the two boys that as they had been exceedingly rude to Mrs. Wilson during the morning, they had better keep themselves out of sight, and she would get what provender she could and bring it out to the hammock, where they would divide and enjoy the spoils.

Now the way in which domestic affairs were arranged at Bladensbrook was no secret in the village. It was well known in the Rectory kitchen that if the young squire chanced to be lunching or dining alone he would be waited on in precisely the same state as if his mother were there ; it was well known that he would dress for his dinner, and have the regular number of courses, and behave himself as if he were forty instead of fourteen ; so when he appeared together with Miss Margot in

quest of fat rascals, Mrs. Wilson could—to use her own phraseology—“have been knocked down with a feather.” “Law, there, now,” said she, to the parlourmaid afterwards, “it give me quite a turn when I see that grand young gentleman coming along with Miss Margot to ask for a plateful of fat rascals. Lucky thing to have had ’em by me. Many’s the day when I haven’t got a fat rascal in the place, and it would have looked poor to the squire if we hadn’t got that much. I don’t think he had ever been through a kitchen door in his life before. He touched his hat and he says—‘Aw—good day,’ as if he was a long way off and didn’t quite see me. It was very queer, and Miss Margot she says to me, says she, ‘Mrs. Wilson,’ she says, ‘please we have come to ask you a favour.’ ‘Certainly Miss—and Sir,’ said I. ‘Well, you did a baking of fat rascals this morning?’ ‘I did, Miss Margot,’ says I, ‘and Sir.’ ‘Well, please, Mrs. Wilson, if you don’t want them all for tea we should like to have some, because the squire here has never tasted a fat rascal in his life, have you, Godfrey?’ The young squire said he believed as he hadn’t. So I bustles in and fetches ’em out a plateful, and temptin’ they were. I meant to have had that plateful for our tea, Patterson, though that’s neither here nor there. You girls must just put up with a spoonful of jam instead. And Miss Margot said to me, ‘Are these all you made this morning?’ ‘They are not quite all,’ says I. ‘Well, then, Mrs. Wilson, we’ll have the lot,’ say she; ‘what do you think?’ she says, turning

to the squire. 'Aw,' says he, 'yes—I think if Mrs. Wilson doesn't *mind* that it would be as well to have the lot. You see, there are others.' Now both the young gentlemen was very saucy to me this morning; but there, I couldn't deny Miss Margot before the squire's very face, so I bustled in again and I fetched out all that I had made. It do go to my heart, but there, it's to keep up the credit of the house, and Miss Margot she picks out a little nice brown one and she sticks it up to the squire's mouth and says, 'Taste that!' and he took it quite meekly, though he did look as if he was forty instead of fourteen, and she gives me a nod and says, 'Thank you, Mrs. Wilson, you are an old duck!' and then they went away together and all my fat rascals with 'em."

"Godfrey," said Margot, as they turned out of the back premises into a more showy part of the Rectory demesne, "you are a brick!"

"I am glad to hear that," said Godfrey.

"Because you might have spoiled everything if you had been stupid and stuck-up and pretended you didn't know what a fat rascal was. We should have been undone, and Jack and Jim would have been the losers, because I shouldn't have shared out with them unless I had got the lot."

They found that Jim and Jack had brought several basket-chairs out under the great elm, and so the four sat and disposed of the dainty little cakes, Margot and Godfrey sitting in the hammock, which her restlessness swung to and fro, and the two boys reposing in deep basket-chairs.

"Margot," said Jim, with his mouth full, "what a brick you are, though you are a girl!"

"No, it's Godfrey who is the brick," said Margot. "I shouldn't have got them all out of Mrs. Wilson unless Godfrey had been there. Godfrey, I think she thought you were going to hit her."

"Oh, no, I was quite civil."

"My dear, you were *deadly* civil—deadly civil, but it awed Mrs. Wilson, and I can tell you, Godfrey, it takes a lot to awe Mrs. Wilson."

They were still sitting there, and the last of the fat rascals had vanished, when a soft voice from the other side of the privet hedge accosted them: "My pretty lady and gentlemen, let the poor gipsy tell your fortune."

"Oh, what a lark!" cried Jack.

"What do you charge, because we haven't got much?" added Jim.

"Cross the poor gipsy's hand with a bit of silver. The poor gipsy will never be hard on young ladies and gentlemen."

"Well, go down the hedge a little way and you will come to a gate. Don't let any one see you," said Jim.

"Never fear," answered the gipsy.

A few minutes later there was a rustling behind them, and the branches of the great elm parted.

"I have got no money," said Margot.

"Let me cross the gipsy's palm for you, Margot," said Godfrey.

The Rectory children were not proud. Their parents were very comfortably off, and their pocket

money was quite reasonably indulgent, but they never had any to spare as Godfrey had. So Margot put out her little soft palm, and Godfrey laid a shilling upon it. The gipsy pocketed the shilling after spitting upon it for luck, and holding the little soft hand looked at Margot long and steadily. "Years and years, in time to come," she began, in a strange, far-away voice, "I see this little lady set very high in the land. The future is not all bright, not all happiness. Ambition will be gratified, I think, although there is not much ambition in your heart, little lady—not much. The day will come when that proud head shall bend, when those bright eyes shall shed tears, when all the world will seem black and dark, but always remember this, little lady, that the poor gipsy told you two things—first, that your place will be high, second, that your lover will be more true to you than he seems to be."

"I don't call that much," said Margot.

"Ah, it may not seem much to the little lady now," the gipsy went on, "but it will seem much by and by when she comes to understand the poor gipsy's words. Tell your fortune, my pretty gentleman?" she continued, turning to Godfrey.

"Oh, yes, Mother, certainly," holding out his hand with another shilling upon it.

She took that shilling and spit upon that also, presumably for luck, and, having pocketed it, she attentively scrutinized both the palm and Godfrey. "Great wealth, good fortune, high place. You will always drive a carriage and four—men servants

and maid servants—and one black, black cloud—but that will pass; I don't want to say any more."

"Come, you have said nothing," said Godfrey, looking resolutely at the Romany woman.

She gazed back at him sideways. "No, pretty gentleman, what the poor gipsy sees in your hand, the poor gipsy will keep to herself."

"But I paid you to tell me!"

"Not so; you crossed your palm for luck. What I see in your hand I would not tell you for worlds!"

CHAPTER III.

MRS. DANGERFIELD'S NOTIONS.

IN due course of time Godfrey Bladensbrook passed through his school-boy days and was entered at Sandhurst, as the preliminary step to going into the army. His mother had not been exactly willing that he should take up any profession. To her it was—or *should* have been—enough that a Bladensbrook was a Bladensbrook; but Godfrey thought otherwise, and the effect of his mother's general training had been such that, having made up his mind to go into the army, he showed her very plainly, though with perfect politeness, not to say deference, that as the head of the family, as Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook, he did not expect to be thwarted, even by his mother.

Being confronted by this kind of spirit, Mrs. Bladensbrook had no choice but to give way, but for some little time she stood firm as to what branch of the Service her son should enter. Her idea was that a Bladensbrook could by no chance go into any regiment except one of the household troops; Godfrey himself had a preference for the cavalry of the line, and for some little time it was a moot point whether he should follow his own will or listen to the dictates of his mother's reason. Eventually young Godfrey carried the day, and he was duly entered at Sandhurst with the object of obtaining a commission in one of the home regiments.

His mother's feelings at this juncture can only adequately be described as being mixed. She was like a mother eagle who had discovered her one chick to be a true-bred eaglet. If you can imagine a lady of that stately, feathered race so imperious, so filled with pride, so dominant and resolute in will that she could brook no interference, permit no will to be set against her own, and who had brought up her one chick quite as if he were but the progeny of a barn-door fowl, you can imagine, perhaps, what the state of her maternal feelings would be when she discovered that her chick was no barn-door creature, but an eaglet as proud, as stately, as domineering, as imperious as herself. Mrs. Bladensbrook was curiously mixed in sensation—half instinctively annoyed at being set on one side, yet half proud to find that Godfrey had inherited all the Pollington imperiousness in addition

to all the Bladensbrook form and beauty. Her mind ran something like this: "He has gone against me, against my wishes, against my views, in utter contrariety to every argument that I have put forward, but he is Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook, and it is becoming that he should be the ruler of his own destiny."

In some senses Mrs. Bladensbrook was a singularly ignorant woman. I do not mean in the way of reading or writing, or the etiquette of society, or in the suitable list of accomplishments such as every woman of position is supposed to have acquired—no, not in that way, but in many matters outside her own immediate existence she was strangely deficient in knowledge. She quite had an idea that her son would be the arbiter of his own fortunes, and if she could have come to a sense of what life at Sandhurst really was, I think that she would have taken to her bed and died. She fondly imagined that Godfrey would take there precisely the same position that he took in his own neighbourhood and on his own estates. She was as deeply interested in his outfit as she would have been in the trousseau of a young daughter who was going to marry a duke, little thinking that nothing would be held sacred from the inquisitive eyes and prying fingers of the other young gentlemen who would be his comrades for the next couple of years.

On the whole, Godfrey Bladensbrook got through his time at Sandhurst very well. He had little or no fancy for anything pertaining to the

disreputable, freaks and scrapes had no pleasures or terrors for him, and his manners being irreproachable and his sense of the weight of authority extremely well defined, he went on from beginning to end in a thoroughly respectable and ordinary manner. He passed well, not brilliantly, but exceedingly well for so rich a young man, and in due course of time he found himself gazetted to the 25th Dragoons, otherwise known as the Black Horse, then quartered at Aldershot, and with a couple of months' leave before him.

The greater part of this leave he spent at Bladensbrook, and somehow or other Bladensbrook seemed utterly different from what it had seemed during all his previous life. For one thing it was soft autumn weather—weather when the days declined slowly but surely, when the many-coloured leaves were fast soddening under foot and the branches from which they had fallen becoming quickly bare, when there were all manner of outdoor pursuits to occupy a young fellow just nineteen years old, such as shooting and cubbing and rabbiting; and he spent a good deal of time in the shelter of the woods. It may seem a queer thing for a young man who was omnipotent on that large estate to have passed many hours sitting in a more or less damp wood on the lichen-covered trunk of a fallen tree. There were so many things that young Bladensbrook might have done other than that, and yet that was his chief amusement.

It happened that autumn that Mrs. Bladensbrook had been suffering from a severe attack of bron-

chitis, and she intended, so soon as Godfrey should have joined his regiment, to betake herself to the sunny shores of the Mediterranean. Her medical advisers had indeed suggested that it would be well if she went immediately, but having Godfrey on her mind, and having arranged with him that she should not go abroad until he had left home, no mere suggestions served to make her alter her plans. Mrs. Bladensbrook was one of those exceedingly tiresome people who pride themselves upon keeping to their original programme, and she was determined, even at the cost of her life, to carry it out to the last letter in this particular instance; consequently, Godfrey was entirely dependent upon himself for all out-door occupations. Aforetime there had been calls to make, drives and walks to take with his mother, and these had taken up a large share of the day; now he never saw her until lunch-time, and it was seldom that she enquired how he had occupied himself; indeed, it was part of her code that she should not in any way seem to spy upon her son's movements. After lunch he would sit with her for half an hour or so, and then she would say to him, "Well, don't you mean to go out this afternoon?" and then he would always reply, "I think I will if you don't want me any longer. Is there anything I can do for you, Mother?" Sometimes she would say yes, and more often she would say no, and then Godfrey would quietly disappear out of the house and be seen no more until he made his appearance dressed for dinner.

As I have said, there was cubbing, shooting, and rabbiting, but there was not very much of the first, and Godfrey did not go out more than once a week. He did shoot a good deal, but rabbiting he had no fancy for, so that he had a good deal of spare time on hand, and, as I have said, he spent a good deal of it sitting on the trunk of a fallen tree in that part of Bladensbrook woods which was familiarly known as the fir coppice. Not *alone*; oh, dear, no! Although he was only just turned nineteen, and the one little damsel down at the Rectory was three years younger, nobody knew anything about it. Mrs. Dangerfield had been dead more than three years, and the old Rector spent the greater part of his day shut up in his library studying ecclesiastical carvings. Indeed, he was writing a book on the subject, a book which was to inform the world what sort of "trimmings"—as Margot persisted in calling it—there were to the pillars of all the different cathedrals in the United Kingdom, a stupendous work which was to fill exactly twelve volumes. Mr. Dangerfield had got about a third of the way through the first one, and became more absorbed in the subject with every day that went over his head, therefore he could not be expected to look after Margot. It had been suggested to him, at the time of his wife's death, that he ought to have a resident governess for his daughter, or else to send her to a good boarding-school; but it happened that Mrs. Dangerfield had always had an absolute horror of that method of educating young girls, while the Rector had an equal horror

of what is called a resident governess. He had a sort of dim, half-defined feeling that if he were to start a resident governess she would soon develop into a permanent mistress of the establishment; so he resolutely refused to make any such addition to his household. "Why should I do anything of the kind?" he said, plaintively, to a widowed sister who had been elaborately expounding her views; "Mrs. Wilson is an excellent housekeeper. She really managed everything in my dear Claudia's time, and has a good general idea of what we liked and what we disliked in the matter of foods. Claudia never knew what was coming up for breakfast, or what was coming up for dinner, and why, after more than fifteen years, should I take these details out of Mrs. Wilson's excellent hands and put them into the hands of an incapable—or, at least, a person whose capabilities are not known to me? I really must, my dear Marcia, refuse to consider the question altogether."

"But the *child*, William, the *child*," said Mrs. Blake, impatiently.

"The child? You mean Margot? Ah, well, you see I promised my dear Claudia that I would never send her to a boarding-school. I believe she had been at one herself where the food was insufficient, or something of that kind; at all events, she had a prejudice against boarding-schools; and I made her a promise, poor darling, within a week of her death. I could not consent to break a promise to Claudia, my dear Marcia; it is out of the question."

"But, my dear William," said Mrs. Blake, "you cannot have Margot running about wild here."

"Margot running about wild! She has always run about wild. She has beautiful manners," said the Rector, looking at his sister over the tops of his spectacles.

"How is she to be educated?"

"My dear Marcia, her mother never educated her. Of course, Miss Atkinson will come over every day by train, as she has been accustomed to do. I take it that four hours in the morning is quite sufficient to ground a young lady, who will have a very tidy income of her own by and by, in all that is necessary. You forget that Margot will not be dependent. Under her mother's will she will have about six hundred a year—er—h'm—at my death, and therefore I do not consider that it is necessary she should be educated as if she were going to be a Board school-mistress. Miss Atkinson is a very conscientious, excellent person. She has given us unbounded satisfaction during the two years that she has been coming to and fro on Margot's account. I think that Margot will hold her own with almost any young person of her age. She reads and writes French exceedingly well."

"And her music and her dancing and drawing, and all the other things that a girl ought to know," interrupted Mrs. Blake, hotly.

"Well, my dear Marcia, Margot is not a musical girl. My dear Claudia and I had a very careful and long discussion before we arrived at the conclusion that Margot would be wasting time to

study any sort of music. She has a very pretty turn for sketching—very pretty, indeed. I assure you some of her little bits done from Nature—the woods and the waterfalls and the cottages in the village—would quite astonish you, Marcia, quite astonish you, I am sure, but for music she has unfortunately no ear. Now I ask you is it reasonable to make a young girl waste many hours of her life studying something for which she has no aptitude and at which she will never be able to make any reasonable progress? I take it that I have really done a great favour to my neighbours, or to Margot's future neighbours, not to attempt to force her in this direction. At all events, that was the decision I arrived at with my darling Claudia, and nothing now would induce me to allow Margot to be taught music, therefore I do not wish—er—I do not see—er—that anything more need be said. I assure you, Marcia, I am more than broken down with my irreparable loss, with *our* irreparable loss. Nothing can ever make up to us for the bright soul who has gone. I should be doing ill were I to subject Margot to the daily dominance of a person who would be a sort of paid spy upon her. Her mother always treated Margot as a responsible person. From the time that she was a baby—three, four, five years old—Margot was always treated as a person with enough common sense to carry her safely through the ordinary affairs of life. We have found the system work admirably, quite admirably, my dear Marcia, I assure you. For instance, there is round

in the farm buildings a chaff-cutting machine. Do you know what a chaff-cutting machine is, Marcia?"

"I don't," said Mrs. Blake, shortly, feeling that she was getting the worst of the argument.

"A chaff-cutting machine, my dear Marcia, is a thing with many knives, and a child happening to be standing too near might easily be caught by its pinafore or something and drawn through its teeth only to come out at the other end in little slices. They are fascinating things to watch, and children mostly love them dearly. I believe that some mothers with chaff-cutting machines—I mean to say some mothers who have chaff-cutting machines upon their premises—suffer untold agony on account of the tendency of children always to go where there is danger. Now my dear Claudia was a wise woman. When we came here to Dangerfield, she at once investigated every point of serious danger. It seemed to her that the chaff-cutting machine was quite the most dangerous thing in the establishment; so she gathered her children together, the two boys and Margot, and she said to them, 'I want you to come with me into the chaff-cutting house.' I believe that Jim remarked that it would be very jolly, but Claudia said, 'Perhaps it won't be as jolly as you think. I want to explain to you, my dear children,' she continued, when she had them all assembled in the little shed where the machine is, 'that this is a most dangerous machine. We have to use it, because chaff must be cut up and properly prepared for the animals to

eat it, and there may be times when the door will be unlocked and you will be able to walk in as easily as you can walk into the drawing-room. So I want you to see what a chaff-cutting machine can do. I have brought a chicken with me. Now, Bill,' she said to one of the men, 'I want you to hold this so that the machine will catch it. You, George, will be good enough to turn the machine for me exactly as you do when you are cutting up chaff. Now, children, be sure that you watch this. Now Bill will hold the chicken just where he puts his hand and he will leave it there. Now, do you see?' Well, I need not tell you, Marcia, that in about three minutes that chicken was perfectly useless for culinary purposes, and when they had gathered the fragments together, my dear Claudia said to the children, 'Now, I want you to clearly understand that if you get any of your fingers caught in this chaff-cutter, this is what you will come out like at the other end.' It was far better than forbidding them to go into the chaff-cutting house. I feel," said the Rector, resting his elbow on the arms of his chair and putting the tips of his fingers together, "that in carrying out my dear Claudia's system—my dear dead wife's system with regard to the children—that I shall be doing the only right thing, apart from our irreparable loss—for already, I assure you, Marcia, I feel terribly the want of somebody to go and talk to, somebody to whom I can explain my book, somebody to whom I can tell little details in the parish, somebody to whom I can carry my little worries and

troubles, more than you perhaps can suspect. I daresay as time goes on I shall feel it less—time is very merciful to all of us—but I should ill requite my dear Claudia if, now that she is removed from us to our intense sorrow, I were deliberately to alter one jot of the rules she has laid down for the household. Therefore, Mrs. Wilson will continue to be the housekeeper, as she has been for fifteen years; Miss Atkinson will continue her work of educating Margot,—that is to say, she will come out from Swanborough every morning by the eight o'clock train, and she will return by the train which goes immediately after lunch. Once a week Margot will go in for her dancing lesson, because my dear Claudia was firmly of opinion that dancing was excellent for developing a young girl's figure and for improving her health. She will go to church on Sundays and sit where she has always sat, and sometimes she will go up to the House and see our good friend Mrs. Bladensbrook, and sometimes she will have young friends here or she will go to see young friends, and although she will miss her mother terribly—*terribly*—yet I hope that her father will contrive to make her life fairly bright and certainly happy. And now, Marcia, my dear sister, I thank you very much for your well-meant interference, but I feel there is nothing more to be said upon the subject."

"And if ever," Mrs. Blake said to herself later on when thinking over the conversation, "if ever a consummate idiot lived, my brother, William Dangerfield, is that one!"

CHAPTER IV.

HEYDAY.

HOWEVER, idiot or not, the Rector was the master of Dangerfield Rectory, and life went on exactly as he had said it would do. Time did soften the blow of losing his wife; as he became absorbed in his great book he missed her less and less, and as Margot grew up straight and strong and exceedingly fair to see, as she made very good progress with her lessons, he did not see that he had made any mistakes in the planning out of her every-day life.

"Always remember, Margot," he said to her one day, when she had shown him some bold little sketch in sepia of the church-tower and one angle of the church-yard, "always remember that this is your gift. General education is very well, very good for all of us, but a little general education goes a long way, but a little cultivation of our gift—whatever our gift may be—scarcely goes any way at all. Any mediocre brain can learn to read and write, to speak good English and intelligible French, to add up two and two and the like; but to be able, with a few strokes of the paint-brush, to reproduce a scene as you have done here, that is a gift, and you cannot cultivate a gift too much, you cannot spare too much time, you cannot bestow too much pains upon it; therefore, let me

urge you as your best friend to do all that you can to increase your talent in this direction. Go to Nature, my child, go to Nature! The greatest painter who ever glorified the English nation was one William Turner. Why did Turner succeed? Because he was bold enough to paint Nature as he saw her."

Consequently, when Mrs. Dangerfield had been dead three years, and Margot had found out the charms of sitting upon the trunk of a fallen tree in the fir coppice, her father's advice to go to Nature stood her in good stead. It was not very likely that he would ask her on her return where she had been. If he did so, she would say, "Oh, I have been painting such a lovely bit. I will get it and show you, Dad." But Margot kept discreetly silent about trunks of fallen trees. Sometimes she mentioned quite incidentally that she had seen Godfrey Bladensbrook, that he was still at home looking forward very much to joining his regiment, and that his mother's bronchitis was little, if any, better. On these occasions Mr. Dangerfield almost invariably made the same remark, "Ah, I am afraid that iron constitution is giving way a little. I must go up and see my good friend. A wonderful woman, Margot! A wonderful woman! A good mother to young Godfrey if ever a good mother lived."

"Oh, yes; Godfrey always says so. Godfrey adores his mother," Margot would say.

"Yes; well, he has every right to do so. I must go up and see her. I will go to-morrow."

And sure enough the following day the Rector would quietly stroll over to the Hall and spend an hour very profitably with its mistress. They were great friends, Mrs. Bladensbrook and the Rector; they had many ideas in common and a mutual interest in looking after the welfare of their children, and then, you see, neither of them knew that at that very moment Godfrey and Margot were sitting two miles away in a damp wood trying hard to catch rheumatic fever.

"Dad has gone up to see your mother," Margot was saying at the very moment the Rector was condoling with the mistress of the great house on her enforced stay indoors.

"Oh, has he? Well, that is awfully good of him," said Godfrey. "You know, my mother is feeling being shut up most awfully. She is so active, and somehow she always wants to be in the thick of everything, that it is a real hardship to her to have to stay cooped up a perfect prisoner as she is. I am glad the Rector has gone up to see her, dear old chap. I always think," he went on, reflectively, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and fixedly regarding the knob of his stick, "I always think my mother and your father must have a great deal in common. You see, they both got left."

"Yes, and they neither of them got married," said Margot.

"Oh, my mother wouldn't have married anybody!"

"Neither would my father," retorted Margot.

"Of course," she went on, with a sort of sigh, "if my father had married again, or if he had listened to Aunt Marcia's suggestion that I should have a horrid dragon of a governess stuck always in the house, life would have been dreadful for me—dreadful. But father wouldn't; he was much too loyal to mother. He wouldn't send me to school and he wouldn't have a governess in the house; and I can tell you it *was* a blessing. Why, if I had had a step-mother, or even a governess, I should not have been able to come out this afternoon. I should have had to say where I was going and what I was going to do! It would have been dreadful!"

"I suppose the Rector never asks you?"

"No—sometimes he does. Sometimes he says in a casual sort of way, 'Well, Kitten, where have you been to-day?'"

"And you always tell him?"

"Why, yes. If I have been in the woods, I say I have been in the woods. I couldn't tell stories about it. Why should I?"

"Oh, no; I didn't mean that; but, of course, you know, Margot, there are people round about Bladensbrook who might think it a little out of the ordinary that you and I should be as good friends as we are."

"Yes," Margot admitted, "that is quite true. I remember how last year they used to talk over Miss Westaby and the curate; but, then, they were going to be married, and that is different to us."

"I don't know why it should be so different to us," said Godfrey, working vigorously at the displacement of a root which had grown above ground.

"Ah, well, but it *is*," said Margot. "I like you and you like me, and we are great friends, but, at the same time, you are going into the Black Horse when this leave comes to an end, and I—well, I don't know *what* is going to happen to me."

"What do you think is going to happen to you?" said Godfrey.

"Well, I don't know, but I rather think that father intends to get six months' leave and to take me abroad."

"Oh, is that a new scheme?"

"Well, it is and it isn't. You see, father is writing this book on ecclesiastical carvings—the trimmings on the tops of the pillars, you know—and he wants to compare all the principal cathedrals in England with all the principal cathedrals on the Continent. He and my mother always promised themselves that they would take this trip, and father doesn't see why he and I should not go just the same."

"And after that?" said Godfrey.

"After that," said Margot, "I don't know. One never knows what will happen. You see, I shall be seventeen when we come back again, and I shall have done with Miss Atkinson and all that lot, and I shall come out and go to dances and that sort of thing."

"And perhaps," said Godfrey, in a voice which

he tried hard to make quite an ordinary one, "and perhaps you might marry somebody."

"Oh, yes, I *might* marry somebody," said Margot, lightly; "I might meet with a German prince, or an Italian count, or a French circus rider, or come back here and marry a curate: one never knows. If I was going to marry anybody," she went on, "I would rather not marry him here. I would rather not have it happen here."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because round about Bladensbrook everybody talks so—they all do it, we all do it, everybody does it; and when Miss Westaby married Mr. Winnington, do you know she wasn't even let to choose her own wedding-gown? no, indeed she wasn't! Miss Westaby made up her mind she would be married in a travelling dress, which was most sensible of her, though, all the same, I would rather be married in white myself. She bought herself a tailor-built dress when she was in London—*perfect*! I assure you, Godfrey, it was just perfect, and you know what a good figure Miss Westaby had; she really looked killing in it, and she had a dear little duck of a hat to match, and, in fact, everything that suited her best. But Mrs. Westaby must needs go and tell all the old ladies and people, you know, what her daughter was going to wear, and they all said she *must* be married in a bride's dress. She said she wouldn't be married in a bride's dress, that she was going to live in an East End parish, and she wouldn't be able to wear out a white satin dress, and she

wouldn't buy a white satin dress. But they worried her to such an extent that at last she gave way and compromised the matter, and she was married in a handsome brown brocade, in which she looked perfectly dowdy. No, it's very certain that any girl living within five miles of Bladensbrook will have a better time if she marries whilst she is away on a visit."

"But if she wanted a Bladensbrook man?" Godfrey suggested.

"I couldn't imagine anybody wanting a Bladensbrook man," said Margot. "There is only one family in Bladensbrook who is worth looking at, and that is your own; and you are much too young to even think about being married for years to come!"

"You think so?"

"My dear Godfrey, you are only nineteen; you are out of the running altogether, and you will never marry anybody in Bladensbrook. You will go away into the army next month, and you will marry a royal princess or a duke's daughter, or something of that kind. All these Westabys and such like are not for you—at least, you are not for them."

To do Margot justice, she uttered the words without the smallest sense of their in any way applying to herself. To her, Godfrey Bladensbrook was as much a thing apart from any idea of an eventual marriage as he would be in the case of people like the Westabys. He was her great friend, her chum, her better than brother, but she

had no second thoughts in so deliberately discussing the question of his eventual marriage. And Godfrey Bladensbrook worked harder than ever trying to dig up the root which grew just across his feet. For a moment or two there was silence, then he said, without looking at his companion and in a tone which was very much Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook, "I suppose as you would regard Jim and Jack, you would call nineteen fearfully young; but I am not like most fellows of nineteen: I have always taken a man's place in the world. I have always been practically my own master, and when I make up my mind about a thing I don't often change it."

"Yes, that is true," said Margot.

"When I *want* to get married," he went on, with a certain lofty doggedness, "I shall *get* married. It may be in or out of Bladensbrook, and she may be a duke's daughter or—well—a girl of less place in the world, but I shall marry her all the same, and all the talking in the county won't stop me."

"I like to hear you say that!" said Margot, enthusiastically; "it is quite lovely! But then, you know, you are a Bladensbrook: you can do what you like; everybody is not so lucky."

"And yet you think," said he, turning to her for the first time, "that this Bladensbrook is too young to know his own mind."

CHAPTER V.

YOUNG FOLKS' WAYS.

OF a truth, Godfrey Bladensbrook had been well within the truth when he told Margot Dangerfield that he was not like other young men of his age—that he had always taken a man's place in the world, had always been practically his own master. That was so. Mrs. Bladensbrook has always treated him first as the master of Bladensbrook, and then as her son. As soon as he had entered upon his teens she had been careful to keep him well informed as to every change or innovation that had taken place in connection with his estates, and as soon as he left school and entered at Sandhurst, she had made a rule of consulting him upon every point above those of ordinary importance. In some ways this was a good thing for the boy, but, at the same time, it gave him a sense of his own dignity and a somewhat exaggerated idea of the importance of his opinions and decisions. It was not his fault, but he could not understand that the opinion of others might be more valuable than his own. His mother's most firmly rooted idea had been that the upper classes in this country consisted of the Peerage, the Bladensbrooks, and the county families, but the effect of her teaching upon her son had been such as to give him a decided notion that they consisted of the Bladens-

brooks and then the Peerage. The two boys at the Rectory were really the only people in the neighbourhood who ever treated him strictly as one of themselves. They were, as I have said before, a little younger in years than young Bladensbrook, but they would have died the death rather than have deferred to him in any possible way. They were both well-looking, tall, well-bred lads,—Jim destined for a career in a line regiment, and Jack already launched upon the only profession that he had ever consented to hear of, that is, the Royal Navy. They had been intimate with Godfrey Bladensbrook for years and years; they addressed him as “old chap” and other such boyish terms of endearment, wrangling with him enough to show that there was no superiority in being a Bladensbrook—in their minds, at least, even if they were the only minds in the world which followed that particular bent.

And Margot, of course, treated him precisely in the same way, except that she never wrangled. She didn't mind frankly saying that she considered the Bladensbrooks the only family in the neighbourhood worth calling a family, but, at the same time, she never in any sense flattered Godfrey; she had never done so from their earliest acquaintance. The fact, that if he was dining alone he would be waited upon in full state, made no difference to Margot. If he happened to be down at the Rectory when the nursery tea was on, Margot would ask him to share whatever it was without any idea of remembering the contrast between their plain,

wholesome, nursery fare and the elaborate meals to which he was used. Many was the slice of thick bread and treacle with which Margot had regaled him in their younger days, and her hazel eyes would have opened very widely indeed had anyone told her that his very gorge rose at the sight of that particular dainty. But with all the other young people for miles round Bladensbrook he was very different. To them he was always painted in the colours in which his mother had painted him: he was always the master of Bladensbrook; he was always the lucky owner of thirty thousand a year. No other boys and girls besides the Dangerfields had ever been able to get over the feeling that he was a thing apart. With Margot, it was always "Jim, and Jack, and Godfrey," and this was perhaps why the young squire was on such entirely intimate terms at the Rectory as he was.

As the time drew near for him to take his departure from home to join his regiment at Aldershot, Mrs. Bladensbrook began to improve in health, and was able to accompany him to various places which she considered it necessary he should visit before his departure. It was characteristic of this lady that she let her only child go out into the world without in any way attempting to give him advice, or to bind him down to any particular line of conduct. Many women, when their sons make their first plunge from the home nest, egg on their husbands to bestow a little wholesome advice upon them out of their own wider experience, and

some mothers who do not happen to have husbands, or whose husbands object to preaching to their sons, find an opportunity of saying at least a word or two which they may carry with them in times of temptation, of doubt, or of difficulty afterwards. Not so Mrs. Bladensbrook. She didn't so much as say, "Godfrey, you will remember before all things that you carry with you the honour of the Bladensbrook family." She didn't say to him that she hoped he would remember that when the time came for him to marry he must choose one who would be fitting and suitable to his position. No, not a single word. She took his advice upon various matters connected with the management of the estates, she spoke of his going as she might have spoken of his paying a short visit, she spoke of his return in much the same manner, but from first to last she never gave utterance to a single word which in any way savoured of advice giving. From his infancy she had brought him up to regard the honour of the Bladensbrooks as the proudest of his possessions, and now that he had arrived at man's estate she did not condescend even to remind him that such a possession was his.

Naturally, as he had to pass more time in attendance upon his mother, Godfrey Bladensbrook saw Margot less; yet the meetings in the wood were not stopped, and the very day before his departure found him sitting in the same place on the trunk of a fallen tree with Margot Dangerfield by his side.

"My mother has sent down to the Rectory to ask you and the Rector to come to dinner to-night—my last night," he said, when she had settled herself down comfortably.

"Really! What made her think of that?"

"Oh, I don't know. My mother is a woman who *does* think of things. She knew that I should be glad if she did ask you. You will come, of course?"

"Oh, of course," said Margot. "Father wasn't going anywhere to-night, and he is sure to have accepted."

"We have got to the last day now," said Godfrey, pegging away at the root which he had almost succeeded in excavating.

"Yes. Oh, Godfrey, it will be horribly dull when you are gone," she said, in a matter of fact tone. "I feel so lost when Jim and Jack first go away from home; but when you are all gone, when there is not one of you here, it really is dreadful. However, we sha'n't be very long here after you, that's one comfort."

"You will come in the wood then, I suppose?"

"Sometimes," she returned.

"But not with any one else?" he said, half hesitatingly.

"My dear old boy," said the girl, "who could I come with? Jack won't be back for months and months, and Jim would rather see me shot before he would come into the woods with me. He hates woods. I don't know why he should, but he does. He says they are damp and creepy and generally horrible. There is no one else."

"But would you come with anyone else if there was?" he persisted.

"I don't know. It would depend. I don't think so. How long shall you be away?"

"Oh, I don't know. A year, I should think. I may get a few days' leave, but I shall not have any long leave until next winter."

"We shall be home by then," said Margot.

"And then you will be quite grown up. You won't think me so awfully young then, Margot."

"I don't think you so awfully young now," she returned; "not in the way you mean. I think you are very old for your age."

"You think I don't know my own mind."

"I never said so!"

"I think you did."

"Well, if I said it, I'll stick to it; but perhaps I didn't altogether mean it, because I have not known you change your mind very much, it is true."

"You will remember," he said, with the gravity of extreme youth, "you will remember by and by that I am the *least* changeable person in all the world. And as to our being young, we are both young, Margot, and it's a fault we shall mend of every day that we live. I *am* young—much too young to ask you to consider yourself engaged to me, because you might change your mind, and I should not like to feel that I had placed you in a position which would make it necessary for you to ask me to give you up."

"I—I—don't altogether understand you," she said, beginning to tremble.

"You don't? You *don't*?" he echoed. "I think it is so simple. It is just this, Margot: you and I have been boy and girl together, and I am going away to-morrow—possibly, never to come back again. It will be years and years before I really live at Bladensbrook again, and it wouldn't do for me to ask you to marry me now because we should have to wait so long—more than two years at the very earliest—so I cannot say much more to you than this, that you will never have in all your life a truer friend than Godfrey Bladensbrook, even if he *is* too young to know his own mind."

"I don't think," said Margot, casting a half-indignant glance at him, "that you need have said *that* to me. I didn't mean anything unkind when I called you so young. You *are* young—we are both horribly young, and the idea of what you suggested just now never came into my mind before. I never thought of you as anything but as I think of Jim and Jack. I—I—shall miss you dreadfully when you are gone, because we have always been such friends, you and I, and because—well, for other things than just that. Don't say anything more about it, Godfrey. As you say, you are going away for years and years, and when you see other people you don't know what you will feel like. I—I—you don't know what *I* shall feel like. I—I—don't know myself—I think I shall go home. I feel—I feel—*frightened*."

She got up as she spoke, and stood half turned away from him. He looked at her irresolutely for

a moment. "Margot," he said, at last, "I ought not to have said anything of this to you at all. I feel in a sense as if I had betrayed our friendship. You will forgive me, won't you? I am cut up at having to go away to-morrow, although I am going by my own choice and by my own wish. You are sure that you are not angry with me for having said what I did?"

"Oh—no—I am not angry," she said, hurriedly.

"You would rather that I didn't walk back with you?"

"Yes; and I would rather go now, and you can go home by the other way—by the park road. I would much rather."

"And you will not forget me?"

"Oh, no. I promise you I won't forget you." She put out both her hands to him, and a glint of sunlight came through the fir trees, falling upon her radiant hair and showing up the depths of her brilliant hazel eyes. She was half frightened, and yet she was irresistible, and for the first time in their lives the young squire bent down and kissed her upon the lips.

CHAPTER VI.

GODFREY THE MAGNIFICENT.

BEFORE Godfrey Bladensbrook had been a week with his regiment he had been dubbed "Godfrey the Magnificent." You know soldiers are very quick to find out a man's weak points. For years

past no subaltern had joined the Black Horse with so little annoyance to himself as this young man. Perhaps for the first time in the history of the regiment the time-honoured operation which is known as "drawing" a youngster was admitted to be a dismal failure. It was not that Godfrey Bladensbrook resented the process—he knew his fate, and prepared himself at once cheerfully to meet it; but he was so cheerful, his manners were so good, his acquiescence so complete, that for once the salt had lost its savour altogether.

It would be hard to say why he had been so speedily dubbed "the Magnificent." It might have been because he had a full set of photographs, neatly framed in black, of his ancestral home—the North front, the South front, the East front, the West terrace, the pavilion in the garden, the stabling, the historic oak in the park, the view across the mere, a view of the great drawing-room, another of the picture gallery, and a third of the great hall with all its treasures of armour and of curiosities. Naturally, when his rooms got put into shape, the regiment took an opportunity of inspecting them. Godfrey's rooms were very simple. He was too sensible and too thoroughly possessed with a sense of the fitness of things to have anything approaching to fine furniture in bachelor quarters, but still they were all rather new. A dark felting covered the floor, and was brightened by one or two Eastern-looking rugs; he had the rooms repapered,—which, indeed, was very necessary,—and his curtains, though plain, were of the

thick material known as "plushette," and were quite handsome looking. His only extravagance was in pictures and in his toilet equipment; everything else was simple and suitable. Even his toilet things were but modestly good—ordinary ivory-backed brushes with his crest and monogram engraven upon them, an ordinary large-sized toilet glass that would pack up flat into a case when he should have to make a move; but the pictures—well, it was not that they were so magnificent, but they were so many. Besides the views of Bladensbrook, there was a portrait of his father and a portrait of his mother, a fine photograph of Margot Dangerfield, a great many sporting sketches which he had had at Sandhurst, and a quantity of old engravings of all sizes and all degrees of value.

The first day that his rooms were what might be called finished, a couple of his brother officers sauntered in to reconnoitre.

"Well, you have got plenty of pictures, Bladensbrook," remarked Linden, looking round.

"Yes, I like pictures, even if they are not of much value," said Godfrey, choosing a cigarette from a box on the chimney-shelf.

"Ah, yes; they make a room look very homelike—very homelike, indeed. By Jove, that's a fine place!"

Godfrey looked up carelessly. "Yes, it is, rather."

"Your own home?" asked Linden.

"Yes, that is my home."

"All these your home?"

"Different views," said Godfrey, indifferently.

"Very fine place," said Linden, after having carefully looked round the room. Then he brought himself to an anchorage in the chair opposite to the fire and helped himself to a cigarette from the box which Godfrey handed to him. "By the bye, have you any brothers?"

"No; I have no brothers or sisters," Godfrey replied.

"Really? Well, perhaps that is as well for you."

"Oh, I don't know," said Godfrey, carelessly. "I would have liked brothers and sisters well enough if I had had them."

"Well, my dear chap, I have got any quantity of brothers and sisters, and I can tell you it isn't all beer and skittles being one of a large family."

"No, I suppose not," rejoined Godfrey; "but still, I should have liked them well enough."

"I thought, perhaps," Linden went on, with a fine air of carelessness, "that this might be your sister," pointing to the portrait of Margot, which stood at one end of the chimney-shelf.

"That? Oh, dear, no," said Godfrey, in a very heart-whole tone, or what sounded so; "that's the picture of our Rector's daughter at Bladensbrook. No relation of mine."

"She is very pretty," remarked Linden.

"Oh, yes, she is very pretty," said Godfrey, without hesitation, "awfully pretty. A good-looking family. Her two brothers are two of the best-looking chaps I know."

"Ah! Parsons?"

"Not a bit of it. One has gone into the Line and the other one into the Navy."

"Really? You don't say so? Ah, by the bye, are you going into town, or anything?"

"No; I am not going down just yet," Godfrey answered. "I must write half a dozen letters before I turn out. I have some cheques and things to send off which won't wait."

"Well, then, St. George and I will be going down, old fellow. There is a bazaar thing on. Shall you look in?"

"Yes; I will go straight down there. It is at the Town Hall, isn't it?"

"Yes."

The two departed then and went off in the direction of the town together. "I suppose, then," said Linden to his companion, "that this young chap will come in for everything."

"My dear fellow, he *has* come in for everything."

"Oh! Is his father dead?"

"Oh, dear, yes; died years and years and years ago. I remember it quite well. He was kicked to death by one of his horses. It must be sixteen or seventeen years ago."

"Oh, I didn't know he was actually in possession."

"Oh, yes; from the time he was quite a little chap. I believe he is tremendously rich."

"You don't say so? Well, for a rich chap, he isn't beastly assuming. That is something, because, you know, we should have had to take it

out of him ; but, really, he is wonderfully in shape already."

"Oh, wonderfully. I think he is a nice young chap."

I don't wish to imply that life for Godfrey Bladensbrook was all honey and roses, because it was nothing of the kind. He was "drawn" almost every night for the first six weeks after he had joined, and his rooms soon began to assume that half-apologetic air which you generally find about an officer's quarters. What his brother officers began, his two big dogs completed, and at the end of six months nobody could have told that the furniture had been so short a time in use.

Somehow, he never developed into what is known as a very popular officer. His manners were excellent, as I have said before, but he was neither a brilliant soldier nor a brilliant wit. Like his father had been before him, he was exceedingly good to look upon, blessed with indomitable pride, but it was that kind of pride which helps instead of hinders a man ; indeed, I think it was more his pride that earned for him his name of "Godfrey the Magnificent" than any other quality that he possessed. By his great size he was cut off from any wonderful exploits in the way of hunting or riding. There was nothing whatever of the devil-may-care about him ; he was not reckless, because he took no pleasure in being so ; he was not extravagant, because he thought it was caddish to waste money or to make an unnecessary show. He was quite the richest man in the regiment, but

he regulated all his subscriptions and other expenses strictly by the examples of his equals,—that is to say, of the other subalterns. He was always ready with a subscription when it was wanted, but he was never one of the first to plank down his guineas. Now the Black Horse was not a particularly affluent regiment, and a good many of the officers would have felt themselves bitterly aggrieved—and justly so—if this new-comer had regulated his spendings in accordance with his income rather than in accordance with his position among them. So from first to last Godfrey Bladensbrook was well liked. Everybody had a good word for him, although he had neither the dash nor the charm of manner which are absolutely necessary to make what is called a very popular officer.

As he had predicted to Margot, a year went by before he was seen at Bladensbrook again. He had several times had a few days' leave, but he had always spent them elsewhere. When, however, the leave season came round again, and he was free to call his time his own for fifty-six days, he naturally turned his thoughts and his eyes homewards. Mrs. Bladensbrook was very much excited at the home-coming of her soldier son. "I am asking," she wrote to him just before he left Colchester, "some very nice people to come for Christmas, and you might care to ask some of your brother officers to come to us then. The hunting at present is excellent, and Barker tells me that the shooting has never been so good. I

have just been having the billiard-table done up, and think you will be exceedingly pleased with the result. I have also had a high seat put the whole length of the billiard-room. It is a great improvement, and a feature which it sadly lacked in the old times. I remember your poor father, only a week or two before his death, saying that he would have it done. But somehow, when there is only a woman and no man in the house, these things slide on from day to day and get sadly neglected. However, it is done now, my dear boy, and I hope very much that you will approve of it when you have time to see it." In truth, Godfrey did not care anything about the billiard-table. He had always regarded that particular luxury at Bladensbrook as being as good as any reasonable man could wish for, and he closed the letter with a very different idea in his mind to all the little plans which his mother had laid out for him. "I wonder why she never mentioned Margot," his thoughts ran as he laid the letter back on his table. However, as there was little chance of his hearing from his mother again before his return home, he did not allude to the subject in the letter which he wrote to her informing her of the hour of his arrival, and when he reached home and found some eight or ten guests gathered in the wonderful old hall enjoying the delights of afternoon tea, he had no opportunity of asking any question about the family at the Rectory.

It was not until he went into the drawing-room just before dinner that the Dangerfields were even

mentioned. He found his mother there before him, looking very stately and distinguished in a rich black velvet gown, with a quantity of wonderful old yellowish lace and a few fine diamonds, talking to a tall, æsthetic-looking clergyman whom he had never seen before. "This is my son, Mr. Morris," she said, indicating Godfrey with a gesture. "Godfrey, this is Mr. Morris. He has taken duty at the Rectory for a time."

"Really? I am very pleased to meet you," holding out his hand; "but where is the Rector, Mother?"

"Oh, the Rector has gone abroad, dear."

"Gone abroad!" echoed Godfrey.

"Yes. He and Margot were away for six months, and came back in the summer. As soon as autumn set in, Mr. Dangerfield's lungs gave way, and he was ordered off to the south of France, really to save his life."

"You don't say so? Oh, I *am* sorry," said Godfrey, in a tone of genuine concern. "And where have they gone?"

"Oh, they went to——Mr. Morris, where are they?"

"They are at San Remo just now. I had a letter from Mr. Dangerfield this morning," the clergyman replied.

"And you like Bladensbrook, Sir?" said Godfrey, in his pleasant, smooth accents.

"Oh, I think it is an ideal place—an ideal village. I don't wonder that Mr. Dangerfield was so unwilling to go away as he was. They were both

unwilling. I came down a week or so before they left—Mr. Dangerfield and his daughter, you know—and really I was quite sorry for them both. They seemed to dislike the idea of going away again so much. But the doctors were most insistent, more particularly Sir Fergus Tiffany, whom he consulted in town. In fact, he wrote to him from the Rectory after I arrived and asked him if he arranged to have no clerical duty whatever whether he could not remain at home. Sir Fergus Tiffany wrote back saying that if he remained at home he would do so at his own risk, and that he had told him plainly and distinctly that it would cost him his life. And so, of course,” Mr. Morris ended, “they had to go.”

“Oh, yes, yes, of course,” said Godfrey. “Then it was his lungs?”

“Yes, his lungs, and something wrong with his throat, too, and general weakness, you know. Of course, the Rector is not a young man, and in my opinion he stuck too closely to that architectural book of his.”

“I think so, too,” said Mrs. Bladensbrook. “I told him so a dozen times at least during this summer. Whenever I met Margot, whenever Margot came here, whenever I called upon her, she always said the same thing, ‘Oh, my father is hard at work on his book.’”

“Ah, it is a great pity he is such an enthusiast,” said Godfrey, then turned as the door opened and others of the house party came into the room.

He was intensely disappointed. He had been

looking forward so long to seeing Margot during this visit. It was by way of a shock to him to find that they were gone off on their travels again when he had believed them to be safe and snug at Bladensbrook Rectory. He thought that Margot might have let him know, and yet, of course, it was true that Margot had never corresponded with him; it is true that he had never asked her to do so, for he had felt that while it would be delightful, it would scarcely be fair to so young a girl.

"I suppose," he said to his mother the last thing that evening, "that Margot Dangerfield is quite grown up?"

"Oh, quite grown up, dear, and quite a beauty."

"Is she really?" he said, with an indifferent air, just as if he had not known that Margot Dangerfield was sure to have grown up a beauty.

"I have written to the boys to ask them to spend part of their leave here. Jim has accepted for the week after next, and Jack hopes to be able to come later on. I fancy he is rather uncertain about his leave. He may have to go off to Corfu or somewhere, but if he gets leave, of course he is coming."

"That is very good of you, Mother," said Godfrey, "because you know it is a serious thing to have to spend two months' leave staying about with strangers. I am glad you asked them. I am very fond of Jim and Jack. I like them better than any fellows I have ever known. Of course, these men I have asked from the regiment—very good sort and tremendously nice fellows, you will

like them awfully—but they are not to me like old Jim and Jack, you know.”

“No, no, of course not,” said the mother, soothingly. “I, too, am exceedingly fond of them, and of Margot, and of the dear Rector. I feel great sympathy with the dear Rector. I don’t think, you know, Godfrey, in spite of what Mrs. Blake said, that he was wrong about that dear little girl. It would have been a great slight on poor Mrs. Dangerfield—who was a sweet woman, a very good woman, Godfrey, without the least trace of cant about her, a woman with a proper idea of her own position, a woman with a suitable amount of worldliness for a clergyman’s wife of position—I do think it would have been a slight upon her memory if he had radically altered the child’s upbringing. And really, now that Margot is finished and a grown-up young lady, she is so delightful, she is so dainty, so charming, such a little lady. All the girls of the present day are not that. I meet many girls whose manners strike me as distinctly wanting. Their whole mind and their whole time seem to be taken up with tennis and golfing, cycling or cricketing, or something of that kind. I am glad that little Margot is not like that; and really, although I miss her and the dear Rector very much, in spite of my liking Mr. Morris, who is quite charming, I do think it is a good thing for Margot to be about in the world a little. A girl gets such a polish if she has had a sensible up-bringing among socially good people. A few months in a French town seem to do won-

ders for her ; gives her a *chic*, you know, that nothing else in the world is able to do."

"You are very fond of Margot?" said Godfrey, in a questioning tone.

CHAPTER VII.

MARGOT'S DUENNA.

NOT a little to Godfrey Bladensbrook's surprise, his mother definitely decided not to go abroad for any portion of that winter. They had several large house parties during the first half of his long leave, and Godfrey suggested to his mother that if she was going abroad he would just as soon go with her. She had spent a good many winters out of England, and for many years had not spent one in it, so that he was greatly astonished when she told him that she had quite made up her mind not to go abroad at all. "But why not?" he said.

"Well, I feel better and stronger than I have done for a long time," she replied; "and you know, my dear boy, I never think that there is any place in the world to equal Bladensbrook. I am never so happy anywhere else as I am here, and your long leave has been such a pleasure to me that I don't want to lose a day of it. Being abroad with you would be quite a different thing: it would be cut off from all the associations of home, and I should not enjoy it at all."

"But when my leave is over," said he, "you will be left here alone, and that would be wretched for you. Why not let me go out with you to some of those foreign places and spend the last week or so?"

"No, my dear Godfrey, not this year—not this year. I shall go down to Bournemouth if I feel the need of a change."

"Why Bournemouth?" said Godfrey.

"Well, for one thing, it is not such a long journey, and for another thing, Sophia is down there with her girl. Vivienne is very delicate this winter, and the doctor insisted upon Bournemouth. Sophia is very anxious I should go down and be with her, and I think I should enjoy it for a time. But I shall not go until you have gone back; I told Sophia that distinctly."

Sophia was Mrs. Bladensbrook's sister, another of Lord Pollington's daughters, but, unlike Mrs. Bladensbrook, the mother of seven stalwart sons and one remarkably delicate daughter.

"I have not seen Vivienne for years," said Godfrey, finding that there was nothing more to be said on the subject of a foreign resort. "What sort of a looking girl is she?"

"Vivienne? Oh, she is good-looking enough—a nice girl enough, and your Aunt Sophia is quite wrapped up in her—foolishly so, I think. She takes fright at the slightest ailment, and from what she says this is not a small ailment—indeed, to me it sounds remarkably like consumption."

"Poor Aunt Sophia!" said Godfrey, pityingly.

So his leave went over. He had news of Margot from Jim and Jack, who both came in turn to enjoy the hospitality of Bladensbrook, but he did not see her, nor did he hear from her directly. He went down to the wood—well, overcome by a certain sense of sentimentality, and sat on the tree where they had been used to sit together; but the charm was gone; the wood without Margot was nothing more than a wood,—it was no longer a paradise. The tree was damp and the ground was sodden, and Godfrey Bladensbrook shivered and came home again. After all, it is the Eve which makes the Paradise, not the scenic setting.

He met her again at Easter, when he had a few days' leave, which he spent with his mother, but their chances of meeting alone were not many, and on those nights when the father and daughter dined at Bladensbrook she was not, in the natural course of events, placed very near to the young host. There were too many men staying in the house for a meeting in the wood to be possible, and though Godfrey went down and called at the Rectory he did not find Margot alone. For her sins, as she herself said, her Aunt Marcia was paying her brother a visit, and Aunt Marcia, having no opinion of young ladies who lived without a shred of a chaperon in the household, remained on guard with an amount of vigilance and suspicion worthy of a Spanish duenna of the olden time. Godfrey was very polite; told her that he liked being in the army very much, and that he should be home again for his coming of age in the early autumn.

Aunt Marcia laid considerable stress upon the duties of his position, and Godfrey told her with an air that she forgot the excellent queen regent who remained behind when he was away.

"I often think," said he, in a tone which conveyed that the discussion need not continue much longer, "I often think how extraordinarily lucky I have been in my mother. You see, Mrs. Blake, my father died when I was so very young, and if I had had a weak mother or a foolish mother, it would have made all the difference to me; but she is so wise, and she has the instinct of rule so strong in her, that the longer I leave the major portion of the dominance in her hands the better it will be for everybody concerned."

"Then you don't intend to give up the army when you are of age?" said Mrs. Blake.

"I have no such intention at present," said Godfrey. "It would hardly have been worth going into the Service for two years."

"Well," said Aunt Marcia, folding her hands and looking at him sideways, "I must say that I think a young man's place is at home."

"At that rate," said Godfrey, "the world would stand still."

"Ah, in the ordinary sense, as in the case of my brother's boys, it is different; but where a young man is the owner of a large estate, his first duty is towards those who look to him to be their leader."

"Very possibly you are right," said Godfrey; "but I must confess that at present I do not see the full force of what you say."

He tried then to talk to Margot a little; he tried, too, to draw her out of that stuffy and uncomfortable room, but it was no good. He even went so far as to enquire after Mrs. Isaacs, only to be told that that porcine lady had passed beyond the bourne several years before. Godfrey knew it well enough, having, as a matter of fact, been present at her obsequies. He thought that Margot would have the *nous* to take the cue from him and leave out the name of the present lady in possession of the pig-sty; but Margot knew too well what an avalanche of reproach such conduct would have brought down upon her devoted head. An outsider might have imagined that a lady who came so seldom to the Rectory would not have known the exact details of the domestic animal portion of the establishment; but Aunt Marcia was blessed—*afflicted*, her nephews and niece said—with a memory which was, to all practical intents and purposes, a disease, and the history of Mrs. Isaacs was painfully well known to her. Then Godfrey enquired after the donkey, to be told that it had been lent in its old age to an invalid child some miles away, one of those poor little twisted creatures who use sofa carriages and never go faster than a foot's pace even in such an one. Then he asked how the pony was. He had never before taken any interest in the pony, because it was one which the Rector used for parishing and light station work, when, indeed, he hadn't need to use the larger carriage and the horse.

"Ah, you are thinking of poor dear Topsy," said

Margot. "Alas, Godfrey, she is dead. She died the last time we were abroad. It was such a trouble to us, so much so that we have not yet replaced her, though Father does say that he means to do so."

Then Godfrey's ingenuity gave out, and, after enduring a little more of Aunt Marcia's ponderous remarks, he got up to take his leave.

"I will come down to the gate with you," said Margot, making a desperate effort to shake herself free of the shackles of Aunt Marcia.

"Yes, it is a lovely evening," said the lady, glancing out at the window, "and really, for the time of year, wonderful weather." As she spoke, she picked up an atrocious cape of some dark wool work and wrapped it about her ample shoulders.

Godfrey groaned as he opened the door for the two ladies to pass out through the conservatory. Margot cast a significant glance at him. "You see, it is no use," her eyes said, and so five minutes later at the gate they took their leave.

"Do you think, Mother," said Godfrey, later in the evening, when he and Mrs. Bladensbrook were sitting over dessert and the servants had left the room, "do you think that Mrs. Blake is likely to come in September?"

"What, for the festivities, dear?"

"Yes."

"I don't know, I am sure. She does seem to come to the Rectory a good deal since Mr. Blake died."

"Does she? She is a horrid nuisance."

"Oh! Why, do you find her so?"

"Oh, she is so interfering and so officious, and so blatant in giving her advice. I hate people who give their advice gratuitously on every subject."

"They *are* tedious," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, delicately dipping an early strawberry into the little heap of powdered sugar on her plate. "She once tried it with me. I didn't encourage her in the habit."

Godfrey looked down the table at his mother with a glance of excessive admiration. "By Jove, but I do admire you, Mother!" he burst out. "You have the splendid power of being able to put people back in their places without offending them. A man can't do that."

"Particularly a young man," interposed Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Particularly a young man," Godfrey agreed. "Now, to-day, I went down and called—upon Margot, of course, and the result was a prolonged conversation with Aunt Marcia, whom I didn't want to see, and should not mind if I never saw again. She chose to read me a homily on the duties of my position."

"Extremely impertinent of her," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, stiffening all over with a curious wave of pride.

"Yes; she told me that when I was of age I ought to leave the Service and settle down at once."

"What did she mean by settling down?"

"Oh, do my duty to my tenants, and so on."

"Indeed! And what did you say?"

"Well, I expatiated on my good fortune in having such a regent as yourself, and we changed the conversation."

"I don't think," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, smiling, and holding her white jewelled hands together by the tips of the fingers, "I don't think that you need envy me any gift of mine, Godfrey."

"Oh, I was very polite," said Godfrey.

"Yes; but you probably made Aunt Marcia feel sorry she had spoken."

"I don't think so," said Godfrey, quickly; "I really don't think so. Most officious woman I call her. I do hope she won't come down in September."

"We will try to avoid it," said the mistress of Bladensbrook, quietly.

So Godfrey went back to his regiment comforted by the thought that, even in the bustle and stir which would naturally be occasioned by his coming of age, he would be able to see something of Margot. But for once Mrs. Bladensbrook proved to be wrong in her calculations. She was a very great and *puissant* lady, and her will was practically law in the neighbourhood of Bladensbrook, but with all her powers she could not positively dictate to the Rector whether he should have guests at the Rectory or not. She made an effort—oh, yes, trust Mrs. Bladensbrook for that.

"Dear Rector," she said to him about a month before Godfrey's birthday, "I want you to do me a favour."

"My *dear* Mrs. Bladensbrook," said the Rector, in a tone which implied that the favour was already hers.

"Well, you see we are having a large house party for Godfrey's coming of age."

"Naturally—naturally," said the good parson.

"And I want to ask several more people than we have sleeping accommodation for. I have taken all the rooms at the inn—for servants, you know, and bachelors."

"My dear Mrs. Bladensbrook," said the Rector, genially, "whatever sleeping accommodation there is at the Rectory, you are most welcome to. I need hardly tell you that. Let me see: I suppose Jim will be coming home for the week. I think Godfrey told me something about his having asked him already; but there's Jack's bedroom—and the blue room—and the pink room—that is three—and the little green room—four bedrooms certainly, and to them you are most welcome. I am afraid the Indian room I shall not be able to give up, as my sister, you know——"

"Mrs. Blake?" interposed Mrs. Bladensbrook, trying not to betray the agony which she felt.

"Yes. She particularly wished to be here at that time, and, poor thing, being a widow, I never like to say nay."

"Of course not, of course not," returned the lady of the soil, promptly.

She wrote to Godfrey that evening, "No use, my dear boy," she said; "she is *coming*!"

"I *knew* it!" exclaimed Godfrey, in a tone of extremest disgust as he read the letter.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DEFINITE UNDERSTANDING.

HE did, however, contrive to see something of Margot during the festivities. The Rector's daughter is naturally on pretty close terms with the young squire, and in what you may call parish festivities she is usually more in evidence than the average young lady. They practically spent the week at Bladensbrook. Mrs. Bladensbrook filled up the Rectory bedrooms, and professed herself under great obligations for the use thereof; and breakfast at the Rectory became quite an important function; but during the rest of the day the charming old house was practically deserted, and it must be confessed that Margot enjoyed herself very much. She danced several times with Godfrey during the coming-of-age dance—the dance with the "quality," that is—and on the following days she had fine times at the various entertainments. There was the tenants' dinner and the tenants' ball, then the ball for the servants, then the dinner to the labourers and their wives and children, the

Sunday-school feasts, and the tea to the old people in the various almshouses, which was shared by the inmates of the workhouse a mile away. Margot was very busy and very happy, and Mrs. Blake's self-imposed duties as chaperon became too onerous to attempt to carry out in their entirety; but of private intercourse the young couple had very little, and the little there was was stolen; and perhaps it was all the sweeter on that account. Only once did they manage to meet at their old trysting-place in the wood. It was an affair which was conducted with much diplomacy and with a great amount of strategy, for Godfrey, being the hero of the hour, had the greatest difficulty in getting a single moment to himself, while on her side Margot had to satisfy Aunt Marcia as to her doings from morning till night. Fortune favoured them, however. The Rector, in obedience to a hint from his daughter, although quite unconscious of having received anything of the kind, insisted upon Aunt Marcia's accompanying him for a drive into the neighbouring town.

"I would far rather stay at home quietly in the garden," said Aunt Marcia, when the Rector put the proposal before her.

"My dear Marcia," said the Rector, "I really need your advice and help."

"Take Margot," said Mrs. Blake.

"My dear Marcia," said the Rector, "Margot would be no use to me whatever. I particularly want you to come."

So, perforce, Aunt Marcia had no choice but to

acquiesce. "Of course, you are going with us, Margot," she remarked, when she came downstairs equipped for the drive.

"No, Auntie; not to-day," said Margot, very cheerfully.

"But what will you do?"

"I? Oh, I shall be all right. You forget that I am at home to-day, so I could not possibly go."

"But you would have done had it not been for me."

"I doubt it," said Margot; "anyway, I am not going."

"But there is plenty of room," said Mrs. Blake.

"Yes, Auntie, there is plenty of room; but I am not going. Two is company, you know; and you and Dad will get on very well without me."

"I don't quite like it," said Aunt Marcia.

"Can't help that," returned Margot. "I am not very particular, but I do object to the back seat in the Stanhope. It is the most tiresome thing in the world, and on a dusty day like this—— Oh, no, Aunt Marcia; very kind of you to want me, but I much prefer staying at home."

"Come, my dear," said the Rector from the door; "come, Marcia, my dear."

So Aunt Marcia had no choice but to go, and Margot, having seen them turn the corner of the road towards their destination, went gaily indoors with a hop and a skip, and rushed off to her room to put on her hat. She did not generally go up-stairs to dress before going out in the village or

thereabouts; but to-day she was going to meet Godfrey; and, although she did not change her dress, there were various little touches to give here and there, such as made her look absolutely bewitching when she started off in her charming white cotton frock and sailor-hat with its white ribbon. She did not go by way of the village—oh, no; she knew better than that. She turned sharp to the left on leaving the orchard gate, went straight across the road and over a stile into a kind of shrubbery, then she struck across the corner of the park and dived into the woods, where she knew Godfrey would be sooner or later.

He was not as yet there, but Margot did not mind. She sat down on the old tree and quietly waited, and very soon he came.

"I thought I should never get off," he remarked, as he sat down and promptly put his arm round her waist. "Margot, my dear, I am so delighted to see you."

"You have seen me all the week," said Margot, smiling at him.

"Yes; I have seen you, danced with you, talked to you; but that is not like this. It is only like half seeing you. Oh, how tiresome it is to have to dodge humanity at large."

"It is," said Margot; "I have had to do it. Aunt Marcia was determined I should go into Exhampton with them."

"Was she, though?"

"Yes, she was; but I was firm."

"I am glad you were firm," said Godfrey, hold-

ing her hand in his and comparing the little, soft, white member with his own broad, brown palm.

"Do you remember the last time we met here?"

"Oh, yes," said Margot, blushing a little.

"Dearest, it is nearly two years since."

"Yes, it was; before we went to Italy."

"Do you remember what you told me then?"

"Well—some of it."

"You told me that I was so dreadfully young that I didn't know my own mind; but, you see, my mind has not changed at all."

"Apparently not," said Margot.

"It hasn't changed one whit," Godfrey declared, stoutly; "not in any little detail where you are concerned. And about yourself, eh, Margot?"

"Oh, I am not at all ashamed of my mind," said the girl, coquettishly.

"And you have not changed, either?"

"I don't think so. I don't feel like it—except—except——"

"Yes, except——?"

"Well," turning her head away shyly, "perhaps I don't like you quite the same as I did then."

"You don't? How do you mean?" in a quick access of alarm.

"Well," still keeping her head turned half away, "perhaps I like you *more* than I did then."

And then Godfrey caught her to him and called her a great many endearing names—his love, his sweetheart, his queen, his wife. "And you don't think I am too young to marry?" he ended.

"Oh, but I do!" cried Margot. "It's ridiculous,

the idea of your being married yet. We are so young. People will laugh at us."

"Let them laugh; let those who will, laugh. We shall have won each other. We can afford to laugh; we can afford to let others laugh."

"Oh, but, Godfrey, I am sure you are too young. Dear boy, let us wait a little while before we say anything. Don't let us have it all ragged over with Aunt Marcia here. She interferes so; and she is sure to offend your mother; and think what my life would be worth if I offended your mother. It would be dreadful."

"You forget," said he, "that when once you are my wife, you will be Mrs. Bladensbrook."

"Yes; but I shall always stand in awe of your mother."

"You will have no need to stand in awe of anybody. People will stand in awe of *you*. You don't seem to realize that."

"No, I don't. I may some day, when I am used to it; but I am not used to it yet; and I would really like to keep our secret a little time; yes, I would indeed, Godfrey, particularly as long as Aunt Marcia is here."

"It shall be exactly as you like," said Godfrey, to whom the appeal about Aunt Marcia was stronger than any other she could have put forward. "Then, Margot, we will keep it to ourselves just a little while, our precious, beautiful secret; and you will remember, dear, that as soon as you wish to speak you have only to give me a hint and I will go down and see the Rector at once."

"Yes, I will remember; but you know, Godfrey, if you have changed your mind by then, or if you have seen anybody else, you have only to tell me. You needn't consider yourself bound, because I wouldn't marry anybody, not even you, if I wasn't sure that I was everything in the world to him. I am very proud, you know, Godfrey."

"I know you are. I love you the better for it; but I shall not change. The Bladensbrooks do not change, Margot; it isn't a family failing of ours. You have never known me change since we were little children together; you have never known my mother change; you never knew—well, you didn't know my father, but I am told that he was just the same."

"I don't want you to change, Godfrey," said Margot, very softly.

And then he kissed her again—you know how young things do at such times. If you don't, you will some day; if you are beyond that and have never known, well, I am sorry for you, that's all. And so Godfrey left matters when he returned once more to his regiment. He carried with him Margot's latest photograph, a twist of her brilliant hair, an indelible impression of her radiant eyes, and the equally indelible impression of her kisses upon his lips.

By that time the regiment had been moved from Aldershot to Blankhampton, in which place Godfrey Bladensbrook found himself the object of much solicitous attention. He thought that he had never seen so many mothers and daughters in

one community before, and our old friend, Lady Vivian, with her seven stalwart sons and her daughterless heart, came to him as a sort of delightful refreshment. "And have you no daughters, Lady Vivian?" he asked her when he had been talking to her for the first time.

"No, I never had a daughter," said she, half regretfully; "it has been the only regret of my life. Seven great big boys, seven such *dear* boys, Mr. Bladensbrook, but never a girl. I often think that mothers who have no daughters never know half the joy of motherhood."

"Oh, I don't know," said Godfrey; "I never had any sisters, and my mother never seemed to want any. I think I should have liked a sister."

"Oh, yes; my boys were always wild to have a sister. They would have made such a pet of her. However, it was not to be; and they are dear boys, and good boys, and I have to put up with them."

But the other mothers and daughters in Blankhampton! They made Godfrey Bladensbrook's brain reel. The fathers and brothers who came and called upon him, the sheaves of invitations which were showered upon him, the tempting little baits which were held out for his delectation—they were as numberless as the hairs of one's head or the sands of the sea. Yes, and I speak advisedly, for at last Godfrey Bladensbrook lost count, and more than one Blankhampton matron remarked to one or other of his brother officers "that it was a pity Mr. Bladensbrook gave himself such airs!"

"Oh, my dear lady," said St. George one day to the mother of Tina Mornington-Brown, "I assure you a greater mistake was never made. Bladensbrook is the simplest, easiest, most unassuming fellow that we have ever had in the regiment. The whole of us are agreed upon that point. In spite of his enormous wealth, he never shows it in any way, or presumes on it, or anything of the kind. Really, you must be thinking of somebody else. Bladensbrook is quite ridiculously unassuming."

"I mean Mr. *Bladensbrook*," said the lady, rather stiffly. "I asked him to afternoon tea yesterday, but he neither answered nor came."

"Didn't he? Oh, well, it must have been some mistake, because he isn't at all the kind of man to do anything like that; that isn't his form, I assure you; but, really, he has had so many invitations. You see, he is so rich, Mrs. Brown."

Mrs. Mornington-Brown stiffened. She was a pathetic-looking lady, very fragile and delicate, with a curious shadow of beauty about her, of beauty which, by the bye, had never existed. Her first impulse was to disclaim any idea of having invited Mr. Bladensbrook to tea because he was enormously rich; but on second thoughts she bit off the reply, feeling that it would be an unwise one, and said, in a much milder tone, "Ah, well, perhaps my note miscarried; but I was disappointed that he did not come. I had some quite wonderful skirt dancing."

Yes, they had got skirt dancers in Blankhamp-

ton. Two mature ladies of massive proportions who wore Spanish costumes and what they were pleased to call "make-up." Their performances excited a great deal of interest, as indeed they were likely to do, but they would not have brought them name and fame in London. But they had caught on in Blankhampton, and there was quite a competition to secure them for diverse forms of entertainments. They were in great request for afternoon teas, evening parties and village concerts,—especially village concerts,—and Mrs. Mornington-Brown thought that she had been quite fortunate in having secured them for the previous day.

But it must not be supposed for a moment that Godfrey held himself at all aloof from those who entertained in the old city; nothing of the kind. Although his heart was filled with the image of Margot, there was nothing whatever of the churl about him. He occasionally lost count, but he went out a great deal, and he also entertained a good deal in return. It may be said that he was the first Army man on record who utilized the good Bonner's tea-rooms for the purpose of giving pleasant little tea-fights entirely on his own account. By these means he made his peace with the mother of Tina. It is wonderful how a fancied slight is smoothed away by an equally small attention. Somehow, we think less of the attentions than we do of the slights. It is so all the world over. We are quite careless about going to Mrs. So-and-so's parties, and always feel

that we flatter her by going to them; but let the lady give a party without bidding us to it and we are slighted immediately; and it is astonishing how long such a slight will rankle in our minds. Mrs. Mornington-Brown had been feeling very sore on the subject of Godfrey Bladensbrook, but when she received an invitation to his first little tea-party at the good Mr. Bonner's tea-rooms she promptly buried all resentment out of sight forever. Nay, she went further than that even; for she wondered a little in her timid and hesitating mind whether the invitation was the outcome of politeness or whether it meant *Tina*. But *Tina*, alas, was not as young as she had been once. She was getting perilously near to that age when a feminine creature who has been called a girl by courtesy for a long time suddenly develops into a woman of certain age, and Mrs. Mornington-Brown could not shut her eyes to the fact that Godfrey Bladensbrook was still very young. *Tina* was, in fact, old enough to be his mother. It was borne in upon her reluctant mind, as she looked round upon the girls of the rising generation, that it was useless to speculate any longer about *Tina's* future. *Tina's* future was fairly well assured, or, at least, settled. It would be a future with a modest income, a house shared with her elder sister; she knew positively for the first time that *Tina* had overshot her mark, a fatal impediment to what may be called the turn-over of business. Poor Mrs. Mornington-Brown! I always think me of such with profoundest pity. It must be so sad for

a woman in her declining years to feel that the time is fast drawing near when she will have to leave the daughters she has brought into the world to get on as best they can without her. There must come moments in such lives when the chief thought is a wild wish that they had brought up their daughters to some other profession than that of marrying. Everybody cannot marry, and marriage is a great lottery at best. One wonders why some people do not marry, but I think one wonders more why some people *do*, or at least why other people married *them*. Tina Mornington-Brown was pretty still, but her mother felt that she would be Tina Mornington-Brown always.

The Black Horse had been in Blankhampton for more than twelve months. Godfrey Bladensbrook had spent part of his long leave at home, and again Margot had put off the ratification of their engagement on the score of their extreme youth. "Dear Godfrey," she said, "wait until you are three-and-twenty. As soon as you like after you are three-and-twenty, but not before that. We are both so preposterously young." He felt that there was truth in what she said, and he acquiesced in her wishes, though it must be confessed not without a good deal of argument. Then, when his twenty-third birthday was fast approaching, Margot wrote to him that she was paying a visit to Mrs. Blake, who lived at Brixham, a manufacturing town about fifty miles from Blankhampton. "I am going from here," she said, "to stay with some other people. They are the

Merediths of Heckmansworth; you are sure to know the name. I go on the fourteenth. I want you to come and meet me on the road and travel a little way with me—*all* the way, if you like. I shall be leaving this by the train which starts at four o'clock in the afternoon. I get to Heckmansworth in time for dinner."

I need hardly say that as he had not seen her for over six months, and as in the absence of a formal engagement he could not very well take a fifty miles' journey to call upon a young lady, Godfrey Bladensbrook simply jumped at the chance which was thus held out to him of a couple of hours' uninterrupted enjoyment of his sweetheart's presence. He asked for and obtained a few days' leave, and went off early in the morning to Marley Spa, which was the first stopping-place on her journey. This was a town only some five miles from the town near which she was staying, and when the Brixham train reached the little station, there she was in a carriage by herself, looking radiantly happy and more lovely than ever.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT.

"ISN'T it fun!" Margot exclaimed as Godfrey joined her. "Think what all those dear people—your people and my people—and my friends this end and my friends the other end; think what fits

they would have if they knew what we were up to! Don't you think I was exceedingly clever, to carry out my idea?"

"I always think you exceedingly clever," said Godfrey, holding her close to him.

"Ah, yes; but I mean *extra* clever. I had to think it out, you know; and then, if it is a little out of the way, Godfrey, there is no great harm in it, is there? You see, we shall be engaged very soon now—well, we are engaged, of course; but what I mean is, we shall be announced to the world as engaged, and then I suppose we shall be married quite soon?"

"Quite soon," said Godfrey. "Considering the length of time that I have been kept waiting, I should say it must be *quite* soon."

"And after all, it's only a couple of hours' journey, or something like that; but it's enough to make me feel desperately wicked, anyway."

"If you never do anything that is more wicked," said Godfrey, very tenderly, "you will have a singularly clear conscience for the rest of your life. But there, what an absurd thing for me to say to you. Of course, your conscience is clear! How should it be anything else?"

"I don't know," said Margot; "when I think of the tricks I have played Aunt Marcia in my time, I really feel now and then as if I ought to blush for myself."

"Oh, Aunt Marcia will forgive you when you are Mrs. Bladensbrook," said he, easily.

"Yes, I know she will. I have been staying with her, you know."

"Yes, I know. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"No, I didn't enjoy myself at all; but I feel that I am going to be compensated, because the Merediths to whom I am going are the most charming people in the world—the dearest, sweetest, best and most delightful people I ever knew. Aunt Marcia has gone away."

"Oh, has she! Where?"

"She has gone to Italy."

"Really?"

"Yes, she has gone to Italy. She suddenly made up her mind that she has never travelled enough, so she decided to go and do Italy thoroughly. She seemed very much aggrieved that Father didn't ask her to go with us when we have been abroad; but somehow Father best likes to go away only with me. Aunt Marcia fidgets so; and she is not as pleasant in hotels and elsewhere as she might be; and you know Father is very sensitive. He never gives much trouble himself; he is always sweet and civil and charming to everybody; and it makes him feel ill when Aunt Marcia talks about her position and what she is used to at home, and all that, don't you know; so he never would ask her to go away with us."

"And I suppose he never will?"

"Never, I should say. Anyway, Aunt Marcia has gone off with her maid, and they have shut up the house, and the gardener's wife is just looking after it a little."

"And they have actually gone?"

"Yes, she started at ten o'clock this morning. She wanted me to start at a quarter-past nine, so as to get out of the house before her, but I said, 'Really, Auntie, I can't do it. I can't arrive at a house early in the morning. It would be dreadful. I like to get there in time for dinner, and make an entrance.' So eventually she consented to my being left to start by this train. One has to be very firm with Aunt Marcia sometimes. She always thinks that what she arranges and what she plans out must be better than the arrangements and plans of everybody else in the world put together. Now, you know, I call that very conceited."

"So do I," said Godfrey.

"Yes, because, when you come to think of it, a person who is going on a journey likes to plan that journey herself. Aunt Marcia planned her own journey to town, and she crosses to-night; but she wasn't satisfied for me to plan my journey to my liking. However, she did give way, quite gracefully for her. She said she didn't know what the young people of the present day were coming to, and that when she was my age she wouldn't have minded what hour she arrived on a new visit, but, as I told her, girls think of effect more now than they used to do, and she raised her hands at that and said, 'Tut—tut—tut!' But still, I came by the train that I meant to come by. Well, for one thing, perhaps a little because I thought it would be more convenient to you."

"So it is, much more convenient. We don't have to go through Blankhampton?"

"Oh, no; we branch off at Chorley."

But as a matter of fact they did not branch off at Chorley, for, to be explicit, they never got to Chorley at all. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when something happened, a something which banged them up against the other side of the carriage, a something which sent the lamps out and left them in the total darkness of a tunnel.

"By Jove! We are in for a smash!" exclaimed Godfrey, catching hold of her. "Are you hurt, darling?"

"No—I am not hurt—I am a bit shaken." Her teeth chattered together with fear. "Oh, do you hear that? Oh, those awful bumps! Oh, Godfrey, I believe we shall all be killed!"

"Here, hold tight on to me. Hold tight. There, it is coming to a stop. It is all right. We are off the rails, I think. It will be all right, dear; don't tremble so."

"I can't help trembling. Oh, I feel as if everything was going upside down," and then she distinguished herself by quietly sitting down in the darkness and fainting.

The situation was really a horrible one. Without, all was confusion and excitement. Godfrey let down the window and peered out into the thick gloom. There was a flare of light just ahead of him where he imagined the engine was; and the engine itself was snorting so as to drown every noise except the loudest shrieks of the affrighted

passengers. He felt in his pocket for the match-box which he always carried, and which was filled with wax vestas, and one served to show him what had happened to Margot. At that moment a guard came running along and asked him if he was hurt.

"Not at all; but here is a lady who has fainted. Can you get her some water?"

"Yes, Sir; a passenger gave me this flask. It is full of brandy and water. Do you think she is hurt?"

"No, I don't think she is hurt. I think she is just frightened and shaken. I will get her to take a little if I can." He forced a few drops between Margot's lips, enough to make her shiver and open her eyes. "You are all right? You are not hurt, are you? I don't think you are hurt."

"No, I don't think I am hurt. Godfrey, what happened? Oh, we got smashed up, didn't we? Is any one hurt?"

"I believe they are, on in front. Take a little more of this, and let the guard have it to give to others."

She did as he bade her, but expressed great repugnance at the unusual draught. "It is very nasty," she said, weakly.

"Yes, I know; but it will put life into you, and I must get you out of this. Here, my man, thank you awfully much. Here is half a crown for you. The lady is all right; she was only a bit frightened." He turned round to Margot again as the man passed on with a word of thanks. "Margot," he said, taking hold of her hand and holding it hard,

"I want you to keep your wits about you. We shall not be able to get forward, I am afraid. We may be hours in this beastly tunnel. For Heaven's sake, keep your wits about you! Everything depends upon it. They are sure to come and ask what our names are, being first-class passengers; and I shall say *Smith*. Do you hear? Can you understand? You mustn't say you are Miss Dangerfield, of Bladensbrook; it will give us away immediately. Even the fellows at Blankhampton, seeing our names in the paper, would know in a moment why I had got a couple of days' leave, and that it was so as to meet you. Remember you are Miss Smith—my sister. Do you clearly understand me?"

"Yes, I am Miss Smith, your sister."

"Of where? Of London. Smith, of London, is safe. Now you are sure you will remember even if you should faint again?"

"I am not going to faint again, Godfrey," said Margot; "I am all right. It was the shaking or something of that kind. I feel quite right, thank you," but she spoke in a dreamy kind of way, and he was by no means sure that she was all right, or anything near it.

"Do you think you can get down if I help you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Do you think it would be better?"

"I think it will be better to be clear of the wreckage, you know. Although this carriage is not much damaged, at the same time one never

knows what may happen. I should feel more comfortable if we were out on the line."

"Then we will go on the line. You go first and help me down."

They were soon out of the carriage and walking along the line. Margot was still trembling and clung tight to Godfrey's arm. They soon came upon the guard who had first spoken to Godfrey.

"The question is," said the guard, "which will be the best way to get out of this tunnel? We are six miles from the station ahead of us; we are only about two miles from the last one we passed. If one of the passengers would walk back and get us help, it would be the best thing possible. I daren't leave my post."

"Oh, we will go back and get help. I will simply tell them at the station?"

"That's all, Sir. Tell them to come on with another train at once, and to bring doctors and such things as are necessary for the injured. But they will know what to do, Sir, if you will tell them what sort of a smash it is."

"Then, come along," said Godfrey to Margot.

"Well, Sir, I would like to have your name, you know."

"Oh, Smith, of London."

"And this lady?"

"My sister. Well, we'll go, and I will send back help as quickly as possible. Come, my child, come."

They started at a quick pace up the line in the direction in which they had just come. It was

horribly dark, and Margot caught tight hold of her companion's arm, clutching at him in deadly fear, although there was no possible chance of another train coming behind them, and it would be easy to get out of the way of another train which they might meet. Besides, as Godfrey told her, it was not very likely that any train would be allowed to pass the last station until signalled "road clear" from the one six miles ahead. Still, the way was gloomy and full of terror. Now and again he lighted a match to see how they were getting on, and at last they saw a gleam of bluish light ahead, and presently they emerged into the light of day. She gave a great shudder as she felt herself once more in the fresher air.

"We have a mile and a half to walk; do you think you can manage it?" he asked; "or shall I leave you here on the bank and run the whole way?"

"Oh, don't leave me!" she cried, "don't leave me! I know I shall go into screaming hysterics if you do. I know I am quite well and strong, and I can walk very well, so for mercy's sake don't leave me."

"I won't leave you. I promise you, I won't."

So they took hands again and trudged steadily along in the direction of Brixham. They didn't waste breathe in talking. Margot was shattered and upset, and full of anxiety to get help to the injured as soon as possible. Godfrey was troubled in another way. He kept turning and turning in his mind how he could account for Margot being

in the train—or, at least, for his being in the train with Margot.

“I don’t believe you will be able to get on to-night, you know,” he said at last, when they came within sight of the little country station.

“Oh, well, never mind, dear. It doesn’t matter. We can talk it out afterwards. You get help sent off, and let the rest take care of itself. It really doesn’t matter much.”

He knew that there was truth in what she said and quickened his footsteps. He found the three officials in the little country station full of dismay and consternation. They had assumed, from not having received the usual “line clear” signal, that some accident had happened, and were soon busy telegraphing his information to head-quarters.

He learned that a train following the wrecked express was then nearly due, and would come on as far as that point as usual, and would then be cleared and sent forward to the scene of the accident.

“And your name, Sir?” said the station-master.

“Smith,” replied Godfrey, “and my sister.” As the words passed his lips, he suddenly remembered that Margot’s luggage was in the train. “Margot,” he said, in an undertone, “your luggage was in the train, of course?”

“Why, of course it was—of course it is,” she replied.

“Are your boxes marked?”

“I have only one huge trunk with me ; yes, it is marked.”

"How marked? What name is on it?"

"Well, there is no name on it; it is marked 'M. D.', and it is labelled to Heckmansworth."

"Well, then, how the deuce am I to get your luggage without saying who you are? Oh, confound it! This has put us in a pretty hole."

"Well, I can go to Heckmansworth and claim it there, surely?"

"No; I will go back along the line and get that guard chap to hand it out to me. Look here, if I get you something to eat and drink, do you feel fit to go back, when they get a train here, and secure your luggage?"

"Oh, I am fit to do anything," said Margot, "rather than have a row about it, and there will be a row if Aunt Marcia finds out. She'll know then why I wouldn't go at nine o'clock in the morning."

"Well, then, I will tell the station-master here that I will go back, and that you prefer to go back with me so as to get your luggage. Which end of the train is it in?"

"Oh, in the end nearest the engine."

"There, now! On my word, it *is* aggravating! But at all events, that is the best thing we can do. Now come across; here is a little inn, and they will be able to give you something to eat. Will you have tea?"

"Oh, yes; I would rather have tea than anything. That brandy has made my head ache."

"Very likely so; but it saved you."

He went and sought out the station-master and

told him that he would prefer to go back with the first train to the scene of the accident. "My sister is very anxious to secure her luggage, if possible. She is very much pressed for time, and, if it is possible to rescue her luggage, we can proceed on our journey without any delay."

CHAPTER X.

A DREADFUL SCRAPE.

WITH little difficulty, Godfrey found the friendly guard and unfolded to him his ideas for rescuing Margot's luggage.

"Which van was the lady's luggage in, Sir?" the man asked.

"It was in the van nearest to the engine."

"Oh, well, Sir, I am sorry not to be able to oblige you; but you might as well ask me to get you one of the jewels out of the Queen's crown as to get any luggage out of that first van. I assure you, Sir, I have been over the wreckage, and the first half-dozen carriages are telescoped one into another. 'Pon my word, it is the most dreadful sight I ever saw in my life."

"Do you think it will be recognisable when it *does* come out?"

"I can't speak to that, Sir. I can't say anything as to that. It may be, or it may not be. I should say myself everything will be pretty much knocked

about. Of course, the lady can claim and have the loss made good, you know, Sir. The company will make the loss good. Was the lady's name on the luggage?"

"No, no," said Godfrey. "Look here; I will come up in a couple of days' time. Where shall I be likely to find you?"

"Well, Sir, I really can't say; but if you would leave me your address, I would write to you. But how shall I know the lady's luggage?"

"By the bye, is there any initial on your box?" said Godfrey, turning to Margot.

"Well, yes, 'M. D.'"

"M. D.! What on earth were you doing with a box marked M. D.?"

"Well, I had Margot's box," said she, in a wild fit of semi-prevarication.

"Oh, I see. That will account for it. Well, M. D. and labelled to Heckmansworth; and look here," taking out a letter from his pocket and hastily tearing off the half sheet, "you write to me at Brixham. I shall be there for a day or two." He hastily scribbled the name "W. Smith, Rose and Crown Hotel, Brixham."

"Well, Sir, you are likely to be wanted at the enquiry."

"Oh, no; I knew nothing of the accident."

"I think the directors will like to thank you, Sir."

"Oh, no; I don't want any thanks. Very glad to do all I could. You have been exceedingly civil to me. And you understand, now, you write

to me as soon as you can get any possible information about the luggage?"

"I will that same, Sir, I will."

So they had nothing to do but to return by the relief train to the little country station at which they had given the details of the accident. By that time it was close on six o'clock; Margot was getting desperately anxious and not a little hungry. "What do you think I had better do?" she asked, when they found themselves once more on the line.

"My dear girl, we shall have to go back to Brixham. You may be able to go on by another route."

"But how am I to go without my luggage? I have nothing but what I have got on; and they have a dinner-party to-night; and I can't get there now till ever so late. Besides, it will tell them that I was in the smash, and then it will all come out that I was with a man and—— Oh, there will be such an awful row about it."

"Well, dear, we must wait till we get back to Brixham. You couldn't go to a shop there and get some things sharp?"

"I might," she said, doubtfully; "but it is late now."

However, by the time they got to Brixham it was already half-past six.

"They do keep open late in these country towns," said she, hopefully; "but still, in any case, I can't get there till midnight. I don't know what to do. They were to send to meet me at the station. I feel most anxious."

"Look here," said Godfrey; "you had better telegraph and put your visit off for a couple of days. To-morrow you can go into the town and get yourself a complete wardrobe. It's the simplest matter in the world. Get a box, have your initials on it, get evening dresses and everything that you can possibly require till you get home again, and let's leave your own luggage to itself. Are there any letters in your trunk?"

"No, no letters, but there is a certain amount of jewellery."

"That doesn't matter, as long as there is nothing to show who you are. What is your linen marked?"

"Oh, M. D.—everything. I always have it embroidered."

"Then you are safe enough."

"But Auntie's house is shut up. I can't sleep in a house by myself."

"You must sleep at a hotel."

"But what will people say?"

"Why, they will say that you are my sister, Miss Smith. We shouldn't be such idiots as to tell them."

"Oh, I do feel so uneasy. I don't know what on earth to do. Is there no other way out of it?"

"My dear child, what other way is there out of it? Fortunately, I have got a few days' leave, and therefore I can see you safely through this. Telegraph to Mrs. Meredith and say, 'Unexpectedly detained. Obligated to put visit off for a couple of days. Beg you will excuse me. Writing by to-night's post.' I daresay you will have to keep a

bit wide of the actual facts to explain matters ; but you can say that your movements were dependent on your aunt's. They will understand that."

"Yes, I can say that. How shall I get their answer?"

"Well—that is rather a question. How to get their answer? Yes, of course you must give an address. Can't that old gardener's wife be squared? Does she know where you were going?"

"Oh, no; I don't think so."

"Well, you walk up in the morning. Go in a casual way, and ask her to keep any letters that may come for you. Tell her you are staying in the town for a day or two with some friends. It is quite true. Give her a half-crown for herself; it is quite simple."

"Of course, Auntie is going to be away at least six months——"

"Oh, she will have forgotten all about it long before Mrs. Blake comes back again. It is the simplest way out of the difficulty. Above all things, Margot, don't say a word that would raise her suspicions. Don't ask her not to say anything about it, or anything at all, and she will take it as a matter of course. How does she know who you might know in the neighbourhood?"

"No, no, true; yet I feel it will all come out. What *shall* I do if it does?"

"Well, you will have to bear it. The whole thing is an accident."

"Your being with me is not an accident Godfrey."

"Well, my dear child, we are engaged; we are going to be married. After all, we have done nothing wrong."

"Oh, that is what people who get into scrapes always say," said Margot, with a groan.

"However, here we are. Shall we go right away to the telegraph office and send off that message now?"

"Yes, that will be the best thing."

They were just turning into the telegraph office, when a sudden thought occurred to Godfrey. "By the bye, we had better send it from the town. It won't make five minutes' difference, and a telegram from here would have 'station' on it. We had better go into the town, and don't let's lose a moment."

They took a cab and went off to the post-office, where Godfrey Bladensbrook wrote out the message which had been agreed upon between them.

"Dreadfully sorry. Prevented at last moment from starting. Excuse me if I put my visit off for two days. Am writing."

"Any telegrams or letters that may come for Miss Dangerfield, keep here," said Godfrey to the clerk; "she is staying in the town. Mrs. Blake's house is shut up, and we will come in to-morrow for any letters or telegrams."

"I am afraid I can't keep letters back, Sir. Stay; the young lady can have a form and fill it in, asking to have any letters kept for her at the post-office."

"Godfrey," said Margot, as they walked away

down the street, "I can't tell you what I feel like. Oh, Godfrey, I can't tell you what I feel like. I feel *frightened*."

"Oh, my dear, don't say that. It will be all right. Everything is working out quite smoothly. By the bye, hadn't you better go and get some things before the shops close?"

"My dear, look at them all! It is early closing day. Fate is against us—fate is against *me*. I never felt so frightened in my life."

"My dear child, there is not the least need for you to feel anything of the kind. I tell you everything is working out quite smoothly."

"Godfrey, how *can* we go to the hotel without any luggage?"

"Well, that is quite simple. We must go and say the truth,—that we've got our luggage locked up in the tunnel under half a dozen railway carriages."

"What, tell them we have been in the accident?"

"Oh, of course."

"Oh, I see. Well, then, do you think I had better go and get some things for to-night? I have got nothing to sleep in."

"Certainly go; but let's go to the hotel and order our dinner first; then, whilst it is getting ready, you can go out and buy some things."

"And you?"

"I? Oh, yes, I will go too. There are sure to be some shops open."

They met with no difficulty whatever at the hotel. The landlord, who met them in the hall,

seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world that they should have been smashed up in an appalling railway accident.

"Certainly, Sir, we can accommodate you most comfortably. Very annoying for the lady to have so much difficulty, but glad to say we shall be able to make you very comfortable. Can we lend the lady any things?"

"My sister thought of going out to buy some."

"Oh, that is not at all necessary, Sir. I am quite sure my wife can lend the lady suitable garments to sleep in. She would perhaps prefer to buy a hair-brush."

"Oh, the hair-brush will always come in useful," said Margot.

"And your name, Sir?"

"Smith—William Smith, London, and my sister, Miss Smith."

Margot blushed. She was painfully conscious that she did not look like a Miss Smith. People whose names are Dangerfield and Bladensbrook and other uncommon appellations always have a feeling that they do not look like anybody with a name which is shared largely by others of the community. The hotel keeper noticed the blush. Hotel keepers, as a rule, are people who do notice trifles. Sometimes those who frequent hotels would be surprised to know how accurately mine host is able to sum them up, socially, mentally, and financially.

"You will have dinner, Sir," said he to Godfrey.

"Yes, as soon as you can."

"In the dining-room?"

"I would rather have a private sitting-room."

"Certainly, Sir; very nice private sitting-room on the first floor, bedroom opening out of it."

"That will do very well. Then, Nellie," he said, turning to Margot, "we will go right away and buy ourselves some hair-brushes. How soon will dinner be ready?"

"Half an hour, Sir. You will dine off the roast, of course?"

"Yes, yes; with one or two other things. Give us a regular dinner."

"In half an hour, Sir."

"Very well, then. Come along, Nellie."

"Oh, Godfrey!" she said.

"You mustn't call me *Godfrey*, that's certain. You had better call me Willie; it sounds nice and homely and sisterly. How do you like your new name, Miss Smith? Miss Nellie Smith?"

"Thank you, Mr. Willie Smith; I like it very much."

CHAPTER XI.

A SUDDEN RESOLUTION.

WHEN they were safely in their sitting-room, Margot caught hold of Godfrey's sleeve with her two little trembling hands. "Oh, Godfrey," she said, "something dreadful will come of all this! I know it. I feel it. What in the world shall I do?"

How shall I explain it? Oh, what in the world are we to do?"

"Nothing of the kind," said he, soothingly. "Not a soul will know anything about it."

"Well, but how am I to account to Aunt Marcia for not going by that train? How am I to account to her for your being in the train? And how am I to account to her for wiring to Mrs. Meredith that I couldn't come to-day? I don't know what in the world I shall do. We had far better have made a clean breast of it and simply said we were in the train, and have gone back and slept at the hotel without any concealment, but to go and give the name of Smith! What *were* we thinking of, Godfrey?"

"My dear child," said he, "it is no use thinking of anything now. The only thing we have got to do is to eat our dinner. Dinner will straighten things out, show things in a different light, and generally bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion. Without dinner, everything looks black, wretched, and frightful."

"My dear Godfrey," said Margot, "when you told the landlord that I was your sister, he turned and looked at me. Oh, I thought I should have died. I would have liked the floor to have opened and swallowed me up. I felt myself blushing—a horrid, red, vivid, guilty, ashamed scarlet. I don't wonder they called the Scarlet Woman the symbol of sin, for sin *is* red."

"But you are not a sinner," said Godfrey, laughing at her.

"Very near to it. We have told downright lies to-day, Godfrey, you and I."

"Well, if you put it in that way, we have. The fact is, I suppose I ought not to have come along to meet you before our engagement was definitely announced. Having done so, perhaps it would have been better to make a clean breast of it. However, it is done now. I did it for the best. I thought to keep your name out of the smash altogether; and, after all, there's no great harm done; and—there, don't say another word. I hear the waiter."

The next moment the waiter bustled in with the first course of the dinner. The two went to the table and seated themselves.

"What will you drink, Sir?" the waiter asked.

"Drink? Nellie, what will you have to drink?"

"Some water," said she, promptly.

"Oh, my dear child, you can't drink water. Oh, is that the list? Well—we'll have a bottle of that."

"A large bottle or small bottle, Sir?"

"Oh, a large bottle. My dear," turning to Margot, "you must drink to our safety. By Jove, you and I might have been jolly well smashed up by this time if it hadn't been for sheer luck!"

By dint of much persuasion and argument, he induced Margot to make a very tolerable meal and to drink a couple of glasses of the champagne which he had ordered. But as the time wore on he found that Margot grew more and more dis-

mayed with the idea of what they had done. "I can't think," she said, for about the fiftieth time, "how in the world I am to explain things."

"My dear child, there is no great necessity to explain anything. In the first place, your aunt and Mrs. Meredith don't seem to know one another."

"They might meet."

"Well, they might; but it isn't likely Mrs. Blake will ask Mrs. Meredith what time you arrived on a visit that happened half a year before."

"No; but Mrs. Meredith may think—she may be thinking that I might have wired at once when I found that I missed the train instead of waiting three hours at least. She is sure to ask why I didn't wire at once; why I let them send the horses to the station to meet me."

"Well, you must make the best explanation you can."

"What explanation can I make? Oh, I feel as if it is sure to come out. It is bound to come out. I shall not be able to get my luggage; I have nothing to take. Even if I told her that my things accidentally went up by that train, she will know perfectly well that I was in the train, too. I don't know what to do. I think I will write and put Mrs. Meredith off altogether, and I will go home. I will write and tell her that Father is not well, or something."

"Don't commit yourself."

"Well, I will write and tell her that—I will, I'll write to-night, and I will go home to-morrow. That will be the best way out of it. I will go

home to-morrow. I must write to Mrs. Meredith to-night, anyhow."

"Well, then, write and get it off your mind."

So Margot wrote. It was a somewhat lame letter, and it told Mrs. Meredith that she was not very easy about her father, that she had had a letter from home, and that she felt her father missed her, and that if she didn't mind she would put off her visit to her for some little time. "I have been away now for more than a fortnight," she ended, "and it is very easy to see from Father's letters that he misses me dreadfully. It isn't as if I had a mother, dear Mrs. Meredith; and I know you will forgive me, and not think me capricious if I go straight back again. I therefore purpose going home to-morrow."

"And what address have you given?"

"Oh, Auntie's address."

"Oh, well, send that. It will be all right. My dear, she won't care a bit whether you come or whether you don't. By the bye, I am going out. I want some matches. I'll get a paper, too, if there's one to be had in this absurd little town; so, if you will give me your letter, I will post it."

Five minutes after his return, however, a new terror assailed her. "Supposing she should chance to keep that letter and show it to Aunt Marcia, and Aunt Marcia finds out that I was not at Eastleigh after she left, what then? And then, you see, I have left my jewellery in my box. It isn't much, but, still, it is important to me. There are things there that Aunt Marcia gave me herself

—Oh, Godfrey, it's bound to come out. It's all bound to come out. And when you think of the row there will be between your mother and my father and Aunt Marcia—oh, it *appals* me."

For a few minutes Godfrey did not reply. He walked up and down the room puffing fiercely at his cigarette, his brows knit moodily together, his whole appearance that of a man engaged in grappling with some very difficult problem. "Look here, child," he said, at last, coming to a stand-still in front of her, "as far as I can see, there is only one thing for us to do. Let us get married at once."

"But how?"

"It is quite easy. There is a train up to town—or should be—about midnight. I will go up by it. You will be quite safe here, and I will come down by the first train to-morrow morning, if I can arrange my business, bringing a special license with me. Then we can get married, and I will get a few days' leave and talk things quietly over with my mother. I would rather, if you don't mind, break it to her, because she is not in very good health, and, although she is very fond of you, it may come in a certain sense as a shock to her."

Margot's heart almost stood still with fear. "Godfrey," she said, under her breath, "do you mean that?"

"Yes, of course I mean it. Mind you, I have no doubt there will be a row of some kind; there will be a fuss; there will be an unpleasantness; but at the same time the various people concerned cannot say the same things to my wife

that they would feel themselves perfectly justified in saying to my *fiancée*. Of course, if nothing comes out, we shall have given ourselves trouble for nothing: on the other hand, if everything does come out, the whole affair will have a very ugly look and a still worse sound. We know perfectly well that if we are married the question is settled, and we intend to be married sooner or later; and the sooner we are married the better pleased I shall be, as I need hardly explain to you."

"You think it would be the best thing to do?" she asked, looking at him anxiously.

"Well, my dear, I don't see that we can do anything else. There will be an awful row if it comes out. In fact, I have bungled the whole thing. I admit it. I have made a mess of everything. Of course, I ought to have spoken of you as a young lady whom I had rescued. We Bladensbrooks, you know, never had any brains; but once married, there can be no mistake about our intentions or anything else; so depend upon it, it is the best thing we can possibly do, and, as I say, it will save a fearful lot of argument afterwards. Now, if I were you, I wouldn't go out at all. You will be all right here. And now, let me see, I shall be back to breakfast, well, to a late breakfast. Well, stop; it is four hours from here to town, and there is a train leaves at twelve o'clock, so I shall be here at four; and I shall find a parson, and we will have it all comfortably pulled off before dinner-time; and we'll pay our bill here and go off to town and have a couple of days together before we worry

about outside influences at all. By Jove! What fun it will be! Two whole days together before any of our people know that anything has happened."

"You are sure you will come back?" said Margot.

Godfrey caught hold of her, "Why, my dear, what can you be thinking of? If I am alive, *of course* I shall come back."

"And you think I shall be able to get my things?"

"Oh, yes; I shall probably be able to get them for you later on. If not, it is no use worrying about so small a matter. You will want new clothes to be Mrs. Bladensbrook. All girls want new clothes when they get married, don't they?"

"Yes, I suppose they do."

There was no answering smile on her face. She was too anxious, too much distracted to see even the smallest ghost of a joke.

"And, by the bye," said he, "before I go, I must have the size of your finger, to get your wedding ring, madam; for you cannot be married without a ring. Give me the one that you are wearing now. I suppose one of that size will be all right?"

"Oh, yes, quite right."

She took the ring off and gave it to him, then Godfrey rang the bell, which was answered by the ubiquitous waiter. "By the bye, waiter," he said, "I don't think you need trouble about any things in my room. I must go up to London, and I will go by the train at one o'clock. The mail, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"My sister will stay here. You will be sure to take the greatest care of her until to-morrow. I shall be back—well, there is a train leaves town at twelve o'clock. I shall come down by that."

When they were once more alone, Godfrey sat down on the sofa beside his sweetheart. "The best thing you can do, dearest," he said to her, "is to go off to bed in reasonable time and try to get as good a night's rest as possible."

"Oh, I would rather stay up and see you go," she said, hurriedly.

"My dear child, I beg you will do nothing of the kind. In the first place, for a few hours we are brother and sister; no sister would stay up till one o'clock to see a brother go away for a few hours on business. It is half-past ten now; let me entreat you to go to bed at eleven o'clock, and I will go down to the smoking-room and put in the time there until I must start. It is quite the best thing that we can do. Remember that to-morrow we shall be together for always."

"Well, in a certain sense," said Margot, "that is, if everything comes out all right."

"My dear child, everything *must* come out all right. Supposing they are very angry, that cannot take us away from each other. You forget that we shall be man and wife. Don't you know," seizing hold of her two little hands and holding the tips of the fingers together, "don't you know the old saw which says, 'Parent and child may part, brother and sister may part, best of friends may part, but husband and wife can never part?'"

She pulled herself together by a great effort and looked up at him half bravely and half in trepidation, "I can't help it, Godfrey; I feel as if I was doing something outrageously and abnormally wicked. I know that you are right; I know that we have got ourselves into a silly, idiotic scrape, and that you are taking the best possibly way out of it; but all the same I feel wretched and unhappy. You see, I have never been in the habit of going out and getting married in this sly, underhand kind of way—perhaps next time I shall take it more coolly."

He laughed as if she had made the most brilliant and original joke in the whole world; and so they sat there for yet half an hour longer, when he insisted upon her going off to bed. "Good-night, my dear love. God bless you and take care of you," were his parting words. "Try not to be dull while I am gone. Remember that when we meet again it will be to pledge ourselves for all time."

CHAPTER XII.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

IN spite of her natural doubts and fears, it must be admitted that Margot Dangerfield slept like a child or a top that night in the hotel at Brixham. You see, at nineteen anxiety does not bite very deeply. She was very anxious and troubled, but

it cannot be said that she was in the least degree unhappy. Before all other men in the world, Godfrey Bladensbrook was the man of her choice; from her early childhood he had been the one dominant note of her existence; so, although she was to a certain extent troubled and doubtful as to whether she was doing quite the right thing in taking so important a step without consulting her own people, the feeling was more than overpowered by the joy of knowing that in a few short hours she would be Godfrey Bladensbrook's wife. So she slept like a child or a top until quite late in the morning, when in answer to her summons a sympathetic chambermaid told her that it was past nine o'clock and a very fine day. Margot asked for a cup of tea, and lay quietly back among her pillows thinking over all that had happened and all that was about to happen. How wonderful it all was to think that before night-fall she would be Godfrey Bladensbrook's wife, the mistress of Bladensbrook; and, in spite of the strange circumstances under which the marriage had been brought about, she was the most utterly happy girl to be found from John O'Groats to Land's End. The most wonderful thing of all, her thoughts ran, was that Godfrey should be willing to make her his wife—for Margot, you see, had very little appreciation of herself. She had been used to herself so long that, to a certain extent, familiarity had bred contempt of herself in her own mind. Some of us are like that in this world; some of us are just the opposite. One knows people—generally them-

selves credited with extreme shyness—whose marvellous opinion of themselves is a source of everlasting wonder to their friends and acquaintances. Such persons always make me think of the quotation, "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb." It is well that they have this overwhelming conceit, for if they had not a good opinion of themselves, they would indeed be poor creatures. The old Scotch minister who prayed, "Lord, gie us a guid conceit o' oursels," was a wise man in his day and generation; he knew the full truth of the saying that the world takes you very much at your own valuation. Margot Dangerfield, however, genuinely did not think much of Margot Dangerfield; and it was wonderful to her that Godfrey, who had and would have the opportunity of marrying so many girls, should have chosen her of all to be his life's companion. It must be confessed that she looked forward to the subsequent explanations which must be made to the ex-queen regent of Bladensbrook with anything but relish. If Margot was afraid of any living being on the face of the earth, that being was Mrs. Bladensbrook, her prospective mother-in-law. However, she felt that even Mrs. Bladensbrook would understand the peculiar circumstances of temptation in which she had been placed; and let her take it as she might, after all, it would be Godfrey who would bear the brunt of whatever storm might arise upon the domestic horizon. So she lay back among her pillows and thought out the wonderful change which had so unexpectedly come into her life.

She was still lying there when the sympathetic chambermaid came back again. "You would like to get up, Miss?" she asked.

"Oh, yes; I should like to get up, please."

"You would like a bath, Miss?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything that I can get you? Mrs. Jones told me to ask you if there was anything you wanted."

"I don't think so, thank you," said Margot. "I got one or two things yesterday, and probably I shall get my box back this morning, or what is left of it. I suppose you have heard no more about the accident?"

"No, Miss, I have heard no more. The poor fellow that was took to the orspital died last night."

"Oh, who was it?"

"One of the stokers, Miss."

"Oh, dear, dear, I am so sorry. It was an awful smash. I was never in a railway accident before. I hope that I shall never be again."

"Well, Miss," said the chambermaid, "it isn't an experience that any of us would 'unger after."

"No, indeed," said Margot; "indeed, no."

"Then you won't want the mistress to lend you any pocket-handkerchers or anything of that kind?"

"No, thank you; I got some yesterday."

The maid stood reflectively by the side of the bed, and as Margot spoke she stooped to the floor and picked up a handkerchief which had fallen

during the course of the night. "That is a pretty ankercher, Miss," she said, as she laid it on the bed.

"Oh, thank you—yes—yes, it is rather pretty," said Margot. A sudden awful realization came over her of the fact that she was known in the hotel as Miss Smith and that the handkerchief was elaborately embroidered "M. D." It was one of a set which her old governess, Miss Atkinson, had made for her last birthday. The initials were large and painfully clear, and Margot laid her hand over it, devoutly hoping that her face was not as red as it felt; she felt, indeed, as if all the blood in her body had rushed into her cheeks. How could she have been such a fool as to leave that tell-tale handkerchief with its *staring* monogram just where everybody could see it! "I will get up, now," she said, almost curtly. "Tell them to give me breakfast in the sitting-room at—well, in half an hour's time."

She thrust the delicate bit of cambric into a place of safety between her corsets and the garment that came immediately under them, and taking one of the uncomfortable new ones which she had bought the previous afternoon she passed presently into the cosy sitting-room. It was rather a mockery sitting down to breakfast by herself, but still she was young and healthy, and she ate quite enough breakfast to satisfy the *amour propre* of the watchful waiter. She even went the length of asking for a newspaper, and, having dawdled away as much time as she possibly could, she put on her hat and, taking her sunshade in her

hand, she went out into the busy little town. She returned for lunch at two o'clock, and having eaten a little she asked for writing materials, and wrote a letter to her father, in which she announced her intention of returning home a couple of days later. She did not think it necessary to make any detailed explanation to him. "Aunt Marcia left yesterday for Italy, and I am staying a day or two longer. I shall be home in time for dinner; and if you will send to the station to meet me, that is, I think, all."

She carried this letter down the street to the post-office herself, and took the opportunity of going in to enquire whether there were any letters lying there for her. There happened to be two, both wholly unimportant, and merely those which would have been sent on to Mrs. Meredith's in the ordinary course of events. As yet there was no reply from that lady; but Marcia, knowing how free and easy she was, did not trouble about that. These odds and ends of occupation brought her well within the time of Godfrey's arrival. She sauntered up to the station to meet him, more because she had nothing else to do than of any set purpose; anything was better than staying alone in the dull sitting-room of the hotel. And when Godfrey arrived he was radiant. He had got the license without any trouble, and he had also brought the wedding ring and several others, his marriage gift to her.

"Now, my dear child, there is no time to lose. Do you go back to the hotel and order me some-

thing to eat—just a trifle—because I am hungry, and I will take a cab and find a friendly parson without delay. I have got the address of one here in the town and a letter to him from—a letter? That is to say, a card from a chap whom I met in the train. He says he is a good fellow, and we could not have anybody nicer to help us at such a time. So I will go straight up to him and get him to arrange it as soon as he possibly can.”

He put her into a cab and told the man where to drive; then got into another vehicle himself and drove off in quest of the necessary clergyman. In less than half an hour he came back radiant to the hotel. “It is all right, my dear child! At five o’clock we are to be at the church, and with the help of the pew-opener and her good man we are to be comfortably and safely tied up, and then——”

“And then for the row,” said Margot.

“Oh, well, a row won’t have much effect on us. I don’t suppose even your Aunt Marcia would raise any very great dust on your side; and as for mine, it is no use raising a dust on mine; a dignified acquiescence is the only demeanour which any one is likely to indulge in.”

I always think a wedding is a sad ceremony. I don’t know why it should be so, and yet one often feels more inclined to shed tears over a wedding than one does over a funeral. So often the young couple are like young bears, with all their troubles before them; while at a funeral one feels so frequently that another poor struggling soul has got

over the worst, has got the hard times over, and has attained to the blissful haven of an apparently everlasting rest. This wedding was peculiarly sad. It took place in a gaunt, bare, barrack of a church, a gloomy barn of a building, through whose dingy windows the already waning light of afternoon came but dully. The attire of neither bride nor groom was festive. There were none of the adjuncts and emblems of marriage. No crowd of eager friends, no scent of costly flowers, no shimmering bridal robes, no bevy of sweet-faced bridesmaids ; no, no ; only a young couple in everyday attire standing before a dingy altar and attended by a snuffy old woman in a poke-bonnet and an equally snuffy old man with a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles. Somehow in that great echoing, solemn church the impressive words of the marriage service seemed to fall with greater significance than usual. I think if marriages were like executions, conducted in private, if these functions were shorn of everything which makes them gay and festive, the solemn pledges and promises which brides and grooms take upon themselves would strike home more significantly than they do nowadays, when they are given and taken in the midst of a grinning, giggling, irreverent crowd, when the bride is thinking more of the set of her train and the hang of her veil than she is thinking of her duty as a wife to be, when the groom is wondering whether his best man will take proper care of his hat rather than whether he will make the bride of his choice a good husband.

Every word of the short service seemed to be beating itself into Margot's brain. I think if she had realized how much she was undertaking, how great and important a step marriage really was to her, she would have hesitated before she would have consented to its taking place in that way. As it was, she did not even realize the full value of her act until the final words had been spoken which bound her to Godfrey Bladensbrook for the rest of their lives. They passed into the dingy little vestry and duly signed the registers; then the clergyman wished them every happiness, and Godfrey pushed something half surreptitiously into his hand, something which rustled pleasantly.

"Oh, but this is not necessary," said he, in mild protest.

"Well, Sir, we have put you to considerable trouble, and it was important to us that we were married to-day." Then he drew him a little aside. "For a week or so I am anxious that our marriage should not be disclosed. We have arranged the affair somewhat in a hurry, and I wish my people and my wife's to hear of it from me. If you will be kind enough not to speak of it for a week, I shall be very grateful to you."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. It is no business of mine—more particularly as I am not the vicar, but only his substitute. Of course, if anybody comes and wishes to search the registers I have no choice in that case. And the vicar will see the registers, or may see them, on his return home in a fortnight's time."

"Ah, that is different. Nobody will come. The fact is, in a couple of days our people will know all about it."

Then, having thanked him for his good wishes, the two took leave of the clergyman and passed out into the world man and wife.

"I don't see the good of moving on to-night, Margot," said Godfrey, as they walked down the street. "It will be better on all accounts if we can get that box of yours. Supposing we go back and pay our bill, and we simply go off to the Mitre, which looks to me a very good hotel, indeed, and which will accommodate us as well as any other?"

"Just as you like," said she; "but how can I go to another hotel and explain about the railway accident and having no clothes?"

"I never thought of that," he returned; "dear me, how very stupid of me. Well, let us go off to the station and see if we can hear any news of your things."

But there they got little or no satisfaction. They were told that the line was now open, that all the luggage rescued from the two wrecked trains had been carried to the station on the other side of the tunnel in which the accident had taken place. "I believe there is a deal of property there, Sir," said the official who gave the information; "and the easiest thing for you to do is simply to go on to Ruxford and claim it."

"Is there any kind of a hotel at Ruxford?"

"Well, there is a very decent one, Sir. It is nothing out of the way, being quite a small market-

town; but it is quite a place to be made comfortable for a few hours."

"Then the best thing we can do is to go on to Ruxford."

Accordingly they went back to the hotel, paid their bill, and packed the few things which Margot had in a Gladstone bag which she had purchased in Brixham.

"I really think," said Margot, "that the easiest thing would be to give our own names. I mean to give my name that was, because you see my box was marked 'M. D.'"

"Your box, my dear, is a pitiable and absolute wreck. The best you may be able to do is to claim any loose belongings that you may recognize. Of course, we can give our own names, if you like. Perhaps you are right, and it will be the wiser."

However, when they got out of the train at Ruxford station, the first person whom they saw was the very guard to whom they had first spoken on the subject of Margot's luggage on the scene of the accident, who told them that he had been placed in charge of the luggage collected from the train.

"I doubt," said he, touching his cap, "that the lady will find but a sad wreck of what was once her luggage. If you will step this way, Sir, I will show you what there is. Some of it, of course, has been claimed, but what is left is really a sorry sight."

He led the way round to the back of the station, and there in a large room was the greater portion

of the luggage which had been rescued from the wrecked train.

"Oh!" said Margot, "that is my best dress!"

"Ah, I doubt it won't be the better for the rumplin' it's had since you last wore it, Miss," said the guard.

"Oh, did you *ever* see anything like this? Oh, that *poor* woman's hat! She'll never be able to wear that any more."

"She's gone where they don't want no 'ats," said the guard.

"Oh, was she killed?"

"Yes, Miss. I am sorry to say she was; and 'er poor 'usband he come in 'ere last night and he see 'er 'at, and he just sat down and cried like a child over it."

CHAPTER XIII.

A TWO DAYS' HONEYMOON.

AFTER all, Godfrey Bladensbrook and Margot eventually went back to Brixham. Such luggage as was worth claiming they packed into a trunk, hastily bought at the nearest shop where such articles were procurable, and carried back with them. To Margot's joy the things at the bottom of her own trunk were not much the worse. Her trinkets and toilet necessities were as good as ever, and her dresses were singularly little damaged; her linen, too, was but little the worse. She having

packed all these things into a modest tin box, which was the best thing Ruxford could produce, they took the next train to Marley Spa and drove at once to the Mitre Hotel. This was the inn or small country hotel from which Godfrey Bladensbrook had telegraphed his address to the regiment, and at first he had suggested that they might as well stay there under their own names as go elsewhere. He went in, leaving Margot in the cab. "I want you," he said to the manageress whom he met in the hall, "to retain my rooms for a week. I was prevented from coming here to-day as I had to run up to London, and am now staying with friends. If any letters or telegrams come for me, be good enough to keep them." He had gone into the house with the intention of making sure that his rooms were retained before asking Margot to alight. Then it occurred to him that it would be just as well if they retained the name under which they had been passing for the few days they would be together. He went back to the door of the cab. "I say, dearest," he said, putting his head well inside and speaking in an undertone, "I really do think it would be better not to use our own name for a day or two. You see, these railway people may come after me at any time; and here I gave my own name, because I had to telegraph my address to the regiment; at least, I wrote to them from Blankhampton, and took rooms, thinking I might be about the neighbourhood for a week or so. I think we had better go the King's Arms at Brixham. I gathered at the station just now that it is

quite a good hotel, and we shall go as ordinary people. Then you can shop and get your things without any trouble, and we can get our letters from the post-office and the Mitre. I can run over here by an early train each morning without the smallest difficulty."

Naturally enough Margot raised no especial objection, and so they went back to Brixham and drove at once to the King's Arms, there asking for rooms for a few days. This was a very much larger and better hotel, and they were given a pleasant sitting-room on the first floor overlooking the market-place.

"This is really quite awfully jolly," said Godfrey to Margot, as the door closed behind the very smart young woman who had shown them the way. "My dearest, I now begin to feel for the first time that you are now and for always mine."

To the head waiter who ministered to them half an hour later in the form of an excellent dinner, and the chambermaid who came to see that the lady had everything she required, the young couple were a great source of mystery. Poor young things, they imagined that they were taken for quite ordinary visitors. They would have been considerably astonished if they could have heard themselves discussed by the aforesaid waiter and chambermaid.

"What is the name of them new people, William?" the lady enquired.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith, of London," William said. "New married, I should say."

"*Very* new married, I should say," replied Jessica,

which was the name of the chambermaid. "Al the lady's things is marked M. D."

"What sort of things?" enquired William.

"Why her 'air-brushes and the 'and glass and her little fid-fads for her pins and such like; M.D in silver letters, as plain as a pikestaff; no mistake about it; and his sleeve-links is marked with a crest and a monygram that I can't make 'ead nor tail of, but not an 'S' in it; as to that I'll take my oath."

"Oh, well, well, that's as may be. They are a good-looking young couple, though."

"Oh, they are good-looking enough. He is a splendid feller," said Jessica; "and she have got such nice manners, so civil and so pleasant in everything she says to one. How long are they going to stay, William?"

"Oh, that's more than I can tell you—a day or two."

"What sort of a dinner did they eat?" asked Jessica.

"Oh, middlin'. Quite peckish for a new-married couple. I don't know whether she was quite so inclined for a good dinner as he was, but he kept saying to her, 'Now, dearest, have a bit of this,' and, 'You had better try this, darling; it is good, and I am sure you are hungry.'"

"What I can't make out," said Jessica, "is that box of 'er's. It ain't in any sort of keeping with 'er linen and 'er brushes and things."

"Well, but they was in the railway accident."

"Oh, then it ain't 'er box?"

"Yes, it is 'er box; but it's one she bought just to bring her things back in. They are going to get things just to carry 'em on in the morning."

"Oh, then perhaps they are not new married."

"Well, they haven't been married very long."

"I'll take my oath of that, unless they was married in short frocks and pinafores—well, you know what I mean, William. You do take one up so sharp, really you do. Anyway, she's a pretty creature. It's a pleasure to do for such people after the lot that comes in and out 'ere, people that looks upon hotel servants as dirt."

Meantime, Godfrey and Margot having finished dinner were sitting at the wide open window overlooking the old market-place. There was a couch drawn to one side of the window, which was a French one and opened on to a stone balcony. The balcony was radiant with flowers, geraniums, calceolarias, nasturtiums, and lobelia, and to Margot, even in her anxiety as to the uproar which she naturally expected would follow their exploits, the scene was a perfect Paradise.

"You know really, Godfrey," she said for about the twentieth time, "I do feel most awfully frightened when I think of what every one will say."

"My dearest child," he said, holding her quite close to him and smiling at her fears, "you seem to have forgotten one thing—there is nobody in the world who can make you afraid now. You are *Mrs. Bladensbrook*."

"I don't think," said she, "that I shall ever really feel like Mrs. Bladensbrook."

"Oh, yes," he replied, in reassuring yet masterful tones; "in twelve months' time, my dear child, you will feel very much like Mrs. Bladensbrook, and in as many years you will feel as if you had been born Mrs. Bladensbrook. One so soon gets used to any new position in this world; and after all, whatever happens, we shall always have the joy of remembering that these few precious days were ours—ours alone; that they were shared by no one else. They belong to you and to me alone; nobody else even knows of them."

It cannot be said that Brixham was an ideal place for a young couple's honeymoon. It was a large, busy, populous, manufacturing town; it could not even boast of being the county town of the shire in which it stood. Twenty years before Brixham had been a mere village; it now boasted a great net-work of busy streets peopled by a swarm of human bees. There was little loafing and next to no cadging in busy Brixham,—men, women, and children were all intent on the business of money-making, and of the few private people who lived there each and all were retired, or, as in the case of Mrs. Blake, the widows of those who had been in business in the town. Staying there was in itself something of a risk for Margot, but, as she wisely remarked to Godfrey, not a soul likely to be on visiting terms with her aunt would remain in the town during that particular month of the year. Her aunt, for instance, who had gone off to Italy by way of Geneva, had complained most bitterly during the last ten days of her stay

that never before had she slept in Brixham after the first of August, and that under no circumstances would she ever again do a similar thing. She had more than once professed herself devoutly thankful to Providence that she was not likely to be seen by anybody who knew her, and she said several times that she should stay away at least six months—probably for eight or nine—in order that she might be asked no question as to the actual date of her leaving home.

So these two remained in the quiet hotel, taking all their meals in their own room, sitting a good deal on the balcony, which was discreetly shaded besides being screened with flowers, and dreaming long, delicious, golden dreams of the brilliant and happy future which spread itself out so alluringly before them. On the third day, the day on which Margot had promised to go home, Godfrey Bladensbrook found a letter at the Mitre Hotel which had been forwarded to him among others from his regiment. It was from his mother, and was strangely unlike her firm, decisive, well-rounded sentences.

"I have a strange foreboding of coming ill," she wrote. "I don't know why I should have, because everything here is pretty much as usual, and if anything were wrong with you, I feel sure that I should have heard it before this. I am almost afraid that something has gone wrong with my heart. I seem to have such sudden attacks of faintness, and they come on me most often in the small hours of the morning, when everything is still

and not a soul is moving in this great house. You cannot imagine what a horrid, dreary, weird feeling it is to have this sudden fluttering of one's heart, this sudden feeling as it were like a hand gripping at one's vitality. I am not nervous, as you know; but if you can possibly get a few days' leave and will come up to town to meet me, I will go next Monday. I shall stay at the Alexandra; it is so near to the green of the Park, and at this time of year one wants greenery before all else. You might send me a wire to say whether you will meet me there or not."

Without waiting to go back to the King's Arms and to consult Margot, Godfrey Bladensbrook turned straight into the post-office and wired to his man-servant at Blankhampton: "Wire in my name to Mrs. Bladensbrook at Bladensbrook," he said, "and say that, if possible, I will meet her in London on Monday." Having sent this off, he felt a little more easy and went back to the King's Arms, where he found Margot busily engaged in packing her belongings in a new trunk as nearly a counterpart of the one which had been wrecked in the tunnel as they had been able to procure.

"My dearest," he said to her, "I have a piece of rather unpleasant news to tell you."

"Oh, Godfrey!" she cried, clasping her hands together; "what is it?"

"They haven't found anything out—not a word, not a thing—but here is a letter from my mother. You see, she seems to have got something wrong with her heart. I cannot refuse to go

to London, and under the circumstances I know perfectly well that I shall be able to get leave, even if it is only for the one night; but I must ask you to keep our secret for a few days longer for this reason. I cannot possibly go and break it to her in the face of such a letter as this. You know with flutterings and faintnesses and such like things, sometimes it may be laid at the door of indigestion and dyspepsia. Goodness knows, it seems too funny to think of my mother being troubled with either one or the other! Of course, it may not be more serious than that. I should like to go up and meet her, see what the doctor says, and, if a favourable opportunity of telling her occurs before I come back, I shall take it."

"Of course," said Margot, "you must do what you think best about that. After all, a few days more or less will make no difference to anybody. I don't suppose that anybody at home will notice that my things are different, or will dream that I have not come straight from Aunt Marcia's house. At all events, if the worst comes to the worst, I must just bear it until you come and rescue me."

"I think," he said, "that I had better give you some money, that you may get yourself some more dresses and replace those that were damaged. I don't want to change a cheque here—indeed, they would not have changed a big cheque here—so I went to the bank the other morning and they got me some money from town, from my own bank, that is. Here are one hundred pounds.

I brought fifty pounds in gold and fifty pounds in notes."

"I shall not want so much," said Margot.

"Well, you had better take it. One never knows what may happen, and you might chance to want something between this and the next ten days, and I would rather that you had plenty of money by you."

"I will get a couple of dresses," said she; "but the notes I will keep until we meet again."

"As you like about that. Of course, you will be able to get as many dresses as you want as soon as the real position of things is announced."

She put the money away in her purse, and making the notes into a parcel in her handkerchief she thrust them into her bosom.

"I shall stay here to-night," he said, "and go back to Blankhampton to-morrow; see if I cannot get my leave, and go to London on Monday morning. And you will write to me?"

"Well, I shall not get home until after the post has gone out, dear," said Margot; "and there is no Sunday post at Bladensbrook, you know."

"Then write to me on Monday, and address me to the Alexandra Hotel. And now I think it is time I saw you safely off on your journey."

CHAPTER XIV.

A MYSTERY.

LOOKING back, Margot afterwards regarded that journey homewards as one of the most anxious and wretched times which she had ever experienced. She felt guilty; she felt that she was going home to be found out; she had no realization of being Mrs. Bladensbrook, Godfrey's wife; she only felt that she was in for the biggest thing in the shape of a row which she had ever experienced. She felt as if her doings of the last few days were branded upon her forehead, that nobody could look at her without perceiving the change in her. The Margot who was going back was not the Margot who had come away from the simple country Rectory; it was a new Margot. It was not the lady regnant of Bladensbrook; it was a frightened, nervous, and miserable little girl who was inevitably to be found out. But when she got to the end of her journey and had reached her destination, she found everything had turned out quite differently to what her anxious anticipations had conjectured. The Stanhope was at the station to meet her, and in reply to her eager enquiry as to how the Rector was, old Thomas replied that he was but sadly.

"How do you mean?" Margot asked, in alarm.

"I don't know, Miss; but I doubt the Rector is

not the man he was. He seems dull and dreary-like, as if he had no spirit to rouse himself and do anything; and there he sits in that study poring over that great book and all them sheets of writin' until my brains feel addled to think of it."

"Ah, but my father is used to it," said Margot, as she climbed into the stanhope and took the reins.

"Well, yes, Miss, there's no gainsaying that; but he is looking very sadly this last few days, very sadly, indeed."

"Have you any other news, Thomas?" Margot asked, as they turned out of the station-yard.

"Well, I did hear the mistress at the Hall was not at all well. She swooned away once or twice, and they had rather a work to get her to last time."

"Oh, you don't say that!" said Margot, feigning a great surprise.

"Yes, Miss, that's what they tell me. I see Long Tom this mornin' from the Hall, and he tell me they were all in a rare taking about it. I believe the mistress is going to London on Monday to get *advice*."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Margot, simulating her surprise very cleverly.

Arrived at the Rectory, she found all was peace and quietness and ignorance. The Rector was in his roomy old study with the long French windows opening on to a wide veranda, which was occupied at that moment by half a dozen lounging chairs and a couple of wicker tables.

"Ah, my child, is that you?" he asked, as Margot put her bright face in at the door. "I have missed you more than I can say; nobody knows how much; and right glad I am to get you back again."

"*Dear Daddy,*" said Margot, putting her arm round his shoulder, "I have come back again like a bad ha'penny. *It is a shame.*"

"What! that you are come back again, or that you are come back again like a bad ha'penny?" said the Rector, smiling at her.

"Oh, that I have come back at all, still less that I have come back like a bad ha'penny. But, Daddy, dear, have you had any tea?"

"No; I waited for you."

"Then we will have tea at once." She rang the bell and ordered it, then sat down upon the edge of his solid oak writing-table and went on chatting. "And how is every one? Everything going on pretty much as usual, I suppose. What's this I hear about Mrs. Bladensbrook?"

"Ah, poor soul—poor soul," said the Rector, laying down his pen and staring in a far-away manner at his daughter, "I am afraid she is in very indifferent kind of health. People may be ill, you know, very ill, and yet it may be nothing that really alarms one; but when a woman of Mrs. Bladensbrook's age begins to have faintings and flutterings of the heart, and all that sort of thing, it makes it a very anxious piece of business. Oh, my dear child, I have missed you very much, and I hope you won't go away again for a very long time."

"I don't know, Daddy," said Margot, who had, it must be remembered, the intention of going away for a very long time at no very distant period.

"Somehow the house is not the same without you. I always feel, when you are away for a few days or even a few hours, that there is something missing, that I have lost something. See what it is to be indispensable, my dear; but don't let it make you too conceited."

"Daddy," said Margot, slipping off the table and going towards the window, "you will come out and have your tea, won't you?"

"Yes, my dear; yes, yes."

"And the book, Daddy?" said Margot.

"The book, did you say? Oh, it gets on, but very slowly. I have neither the time nor the inclination to work in a way that one really calls work, but I sit here and I potter at it; but it is only pottering, my child; it is only pottering, and one never turns out much of the world's work in that way."

"Oh, I don't know, dear; you have worked very hard at that old book. I don't believe it will ever repay you."

"Perhaps not; but some day, when your old Daddy is dead and gone, you will be able to look back and think, 'He wrote the greatest book on architectural embellishments that is to be found in the whole world.'"

Margot dropped the tongs back upon the sugar basin and stretched out a little trembling hand

towards her old father. "Dear Daddy," she said, "when that day comes I shall not remember you by your book. I shall always be proud of you, always be proud of everything that you have done; but I shall remember you first and last as my own dear old Daddy. After all, however valuable the book may be and however famous it may make you, you will always be Daddy to us, first and last, just the same."

"My dear little girl," said the old Rector; "my dear little girl"

They had quite a merry tea after this, with fruit and cream and cakes, and even with a plateful of fat rascals.

"I will tell you," said Margot, "we never had such a tea as this at Brixham."

"Didn't you, though? And does Marcia keep the austere table that she used to do?"

"Yes, dear—worse. She says that eating is fleshly and ought to be suppressed. Aunt Marcia never suppresses her own eating. She preaches and other people practice."

"Ah," laughed the Rector, "that is Marcia all over. 'Pon my word I never did wonder, fond as I am of Marcia—my dear, I wouldn't say a word against my own sister? is it likely?—but I never wondered that poor old Blake died. She used to dragoon him in really terrible fashion. Poor old chap, never a pipe did he have in peace; never an afternoon snooze did he have without interruption, unless she was away. He did have a life, and no mistake about it. So she has gone off to Italy.

What made her go off to Italy at this time of year?"

"Well, Daddy, she has really gone to Geneva. She is going to stay at Geneva until the weather turns chilly, and then she is going to Italy."

"Did it ever strike you," said the Rector, in a mysterious tone, "that she would have liked to have gone to Italy with us?"

"Yes, Daddy. I think Aunt Marcia was bitterly offended that we did not ask her to join us."

"Ah, well," said the Rector, stirring his tea round and round, "I never mind Marcia's coming here; I never mind Marcia when I have got my own study at hand in which I can barricade myself with sermons; but Marcia in a foreign hotel; Marcia sniffing at the foreign cooking and sprawling about on the foreign floors and screeching at the foreign beggars, and generally making everything and everybody extremely uncomfortable, is beyond my powers of endurance. Do you think she realized that, or did she think it was an oversight?"

"Aunt Marcia didn't think it was an oversight, Daddy," said Margot, her face dimpling all over. "Aunt Marcia expressed herself in the strongest and plainest terms on the subject. 'I don't understand people,' she said, very pointedly, 'who can ask one to pay them interminable visits in dull country rectories which are not half as comfortable as one's own suitable domicile. I *should* understand a relation who really cared for one offering to make a journey together. I should have been pleased to share expenses,' she added."

"Oh, did she? Dear me! Well, if she stays away six months this time; did you say six months, Margot?"

"Six or seven or eight or nine months, dear."

"Well, if she stays away as long as that, she won't want to go away again very soon, at least I should think not. I am glad she has gone to Italy. I didn't want to go to Italy this winter. I wanted to go to Biarritz and see a little of the Basque country, and perhaps a little of the Pyrenees. I don't think Marcia would care about that, would she? And next winter, if we have to go away again," which was a delicate way of saying if he were still alive, "I am particularly anxious to go to Greece. It would please me very much. I shouldn't say that Marcia would care about going to Greece, Margot?"

"I really don't know, dear. I should say not."

So Margot's first chat with her father passed over without any suspicion entering his mind that things were not quite as they seemed. It was not until she got up-stairs again, when she went to change her dress for dinner, that she realized that, although you can usually blind a man, it is not as easy a task to blind a woman. The housemaid, Nancy, who had been at the Rectory since long before Margot was born, was in her room, occupied in putting away her things. "Why, Miss Margot," she remarked, as soon as the girl put her head into the room, "you have got a new trunk."

"Yes, I have, Nancy," said Margot; "my own happened an accident, and I bought a new one."

"And you never had your initials put on, Miss?"

"No, I didn't. I only got it at the last minute."

"There, now! And you have only brought about half your things home with you."

"Have I, Nancy?" said Margot.

"That indeed you haven't. There's your black silk dress is missin' and your white satin. What have you done with them?"

"I got them both spoilt, Nancy."

"Why, however did that happen?" asked the maid, turning upon Margot, with the deepest interest.

"Well, they both got spoiled," said Margot; "and it was no use bringing home the fragments, so I left them behind. I am going into Exhamp-ton to-morrow to get a couple of new dresses."

"You have got a new umbrella and a new sun-shade!" said Nancy, who seemed determined to go on with the subject to the bitter end.

"Yes, I know. I lost them," said Margot. As a matter of fact, Margot had left them in the railway carriage in the tunnel between Brixham and Ruxford, but she could not very well tell Nancy that. "I lost them, Nancy, and had to get new ones."

"Dear me, you didn't used to be so careless, Miss Margot," was Nancy's astonished remark. "To spoil your two best dresses and lose your umbrella and your sunshade! I can't make head nor tail of it."

"Well, Nancy, it isn't necessary that you should make head or tail of it. I spoilt the one and I lost the other; and I am going to buy new ones

to replace them. Really, Nancy, you are very inquisitive."

"Not at all, Miss Margot; but I wait upon you and I put your things away, and I wondered where they were."

"Well, they are gone, my dear Nancy, and you will never see any of them again; neither shall I. It's no use crying over spilt milk, Nancy."

She quickly changed her dress and got out of the old servant's way. So that evening passed over without any more comments. Mr. Dangerfield did not ask one single embarrassing question, and Margot took care that she did not put herself in the way of further gratifying Nancy's curiosity.

The following day was bright and fair, a late August day, with the scent of roses everywhere and a certain sense of sleepy luxuriousness hanging over everything. She saw as soon as she entered the church that Mrs. Bladensbrook was in her accustomed seat, looking very much the same as usual, but a trifle pale and bright about the eyes. She saw, too, that she was not alone in the great square pew as was her custom, but that her maid, a staid, lady-like looking woman of some forty years old, sat in the opposite corner. It was the first time that she had ever seen a servant in the Bladensbrook family pew. Evidently Mrs. Bladensbrook was afraid of one of these new attacks of faintness coming upon her during the service. As usual, the lady of the manor and the Rector's daughter went out by the little chancel-door into the glorious summer sunshine.

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, holding out her hand, "I am very glad to see you back again. Your father has missed you very much. I have been obliged to look after him quite like a mother."

"Oh, how good of you!" cried Margot, who with the weight of her secret full in her mind felt doubly indebted towards this gracious lady who, whatever her own pain or weakness, never forgot those who were near to her.

"And how did you leave Mrs. Blake?"

"Oh, she has gone to Geneva," said Margot.

"Really? Did she leave before you?"

"Yes, a little while. She is going to stay away a long time; all the winter, and perhaps longer."

"And she went before you?"

"Well, you see, I meant to pay another visit to some very dear friends of mine about fifty miles from Auntie; and just at the last minute I had a letter from Father in which he seemed so moped and so lonely without me that I thought I had better give it up and come straight home, so I put off my visit."

"That was very good of you. I am glad you did that," said Mrs. Bladensbrook in her most gracious accents; "because you know, my dear, you have only one father, and now that your dear mother is gone he is very lonely. You ought to make very much of him."

"I am very fond of my Daddy," said Margot, with a suspicious choking in her throat.

"I am going to London to-morrow," said Mrs.

Bladensbrook as they reached the gate where her carriage was standing. "I have not been very well, dear, lately, and I am going to see my doctor. Godfrey will meet me in town. Come and dine with me to-night if the Rector will bring you. It will do him good, and I shall be very glad of your company."

For a moment Margot felt as if the very earth must open and swallow her. She, who knew Godfrey's movements much better than his mother did, to be having this told to her as a piece of news was too dreadful to one of her open and candid mind.

"I suppose I may take all sorts of messages from you?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook with a last gracious wave of her hand, and Margot gave a sort of smile and a strange tremulous gesture which might have passed for one of acquiescence, but she spoke no word; indeed, her lips positively refused to utter a single sentence.

It was a time of torture to her that evening because her father at once joyfully acquiesced in the invitation, and they walked up to the House together in the cool of the delightful summer evening. And the first thing which greeted her in the morning was the sight of Nancy standing by her bed with a little tray on which was a cup of tea, a bit of toast, and a letter addressed in a handwriting somewhat resembling Godfrey's. She tore it open eagerly. It contained but these few words, "My dearest, don't write at all until you hear from me. On no account disclose anything of what has

passed, and don't part with the notes which I gave you. If necessary, destroy them; in that case only destroy them by burning. When we meet I will explain everything to you. Forgive me for putting this ban upon you; but I have only two minutes to decide in, and it is the only way I can see to get *you* out of the difficulty in which I find myself. Always your true, loving, and devoted Godfrey."

CHAPTER XV.

ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE.

It was but natural that the receipt of such a letter filled Margot's mind with many and strange conjectures. During the whole of that lovely summer day she went about the Rectory and the old garden wondering what in the world could be the meaning of a communication so mysterious and yet so vague. In what difficulty could Godfrey Bladensbrook have found himself? Possibly it was something connected with the railway accident; and yet it could hardly be that: possibly he had been sent for from his regiment; and yet that was hardly likely. She thought and puzzled and wondered, but all her tangle of conjecture brought her no nearer to the actual truth. When night-fall came, she was still as much in the dark as she had been at the beginning of the day. Nothing, she thought, could have happened to Godfrey,

because she had seen Mrs. Bladensbrook drive past on her way to the station, and that gracious lady had waved her hand with many smiles and just her usual suavity of manner. What could such a difficulty be? It must have been something connected with the railway accident. But wondering and fretting and speculating were all of no use. She wandered about idly during the whole morning, and after lunch she went off in her pony-cart to try to kill time that way. She had half an idea that there might be a letter by the second post; for there was a second post at Bladensbrook, not in the regular order of things, but because any letters for the Rectory were always included in the afternoon bag for the House. She stayed out until very near to dinner-time, but no letter greeted her on her arrival home. She dressed and spent the evening very much as usual, going to bed somewhat early; and as soon as she was safely locked within the shelter of her own room she took out the notes which Godfrey had given her. Why was she not to use those notes? Of course, for some reason connected with their numbers. She made them into a very small parcel, sealed it carefully, and put it away in a small secret drawer belonging to her jewel case. It was a case which she had bought with her own money about a year previously. She had chanced to pick it up in Milan, and it really was a secret drawer, one which she had not herself found out for some months after the case had come into her possession. Girl-like, having no secrets to guard, she had carefully

kept the secret of the little drawer, so that she was not in the least afraid that any one would find it out.

The following day Mrs. Bladensbrook returned home, and the Rector chancing to meet her on her way from the station heard and brought the news to Margot that Godfrey had failed to meet her in London, and had not given her any explanation of his non-appearance. "I cannot understand why he did not come," she had said to him. "I had a telegram from him saying that he would meet me at the Alexandra; but he not only did not come, but he never telegraphed or wrote his reason. I have just sent off a telegram to Blankhampton to make sure that he is not ill. Godfrey is quite one to say nothing if he were seized with illness, for fear of agitating me, and really I do feel most intensely anxious."

Later in the evening the brougham came down from the House with a note begging the Rector to come up to Mrs. Bladensbrook without a moment's delay. The Rector and Margot had but just finished dinner, and he set off at once, leaving his daughter with a sinking heart and with an awful feeling of coming disaster weighing heavily upon her. She had to endure two hours of anguish before the carriage was heard bringing her father back again. "What was the matter, Daddy?" she asked, coming out into the hall.

"Really, my dear child, I can hardly tell you," was his reply. She heard from his tone that, whatever the matter was, it was nothing personal to her-

self, that so far nothing had come out of their escapade together.

Mr. Dangerfield went into the drawing-room and closed the door after Margot. "My dear child," he said, "it is really most extraordinary. Mrs. Bladensbrook wrote to young Godfrey, told him how ill she was, and asked him to meet her in town yesterday."

"Yes, I know that," said Margot; "she told me."

"Well, he telegraphed back to say that he would come to the hotel some time during Monday. She went there, but he never turned up at all. She naturally concluded that duty of some kind had kept him back, and that she would have a letter the next morning. She had no letter. She therefore went to see the doctor, and, according to her original plan, returned home thinking that she would find a letter. However, when she reached Exhampton, it occurred to her that the wisest thing was to telegraph to Godfrey at Blankhampton to know if anything was wrong with him. She received an answer just before eight o'clock which said that Godfrey was not at Blankhampton; that his address during the last ten days had been at Marley Spa. Accordingly she had sent down for me, scarcely knowing what she ought to do. It was really most difficult for me to give her any advice at all," said the Rector, looking perplexedly at Margot. "You see I have known her for so many years, and, except upon parochial matters, Mrs. Bladensbrook had never asked my advice at all. When the squire died and she became the regent

of everything, she never dreamed of asking my advice about any matters whatever, and I really felt quite like a fish out of water. However, she seemed in such distress—and Mrs. Bladensbrook in distress is really a dreadful sight, my child—that I advised her to wait till morning and to telegraph to Marley Spa. Of course, poor lady, she is fancying all sorts of the wildest things, really the most incomprehensible things, for which she has no grounds whatever. Of course it is very unusual and queer, but young men often do queer and unusual things, and, of course, equally there is nothing for it but for her to wait patiently until the morning and then find out as much as the telegraph wires will tell her.”

“It seems most extraordinary,” said Margot, who, poor child, scarcely knew what to say. Of course, she well knew that Marley Spa was the name of the place where Godfrey had ostensibly been living during the last few days. An awful thought occurred to her that if anything had happened to him, surely they would connect his having stayed there with the fact that Marley Spa was only a few miles from Brixham. Then everything was bound to come out, and in the face of that letter from Godfrey she would be able to explain nothing. Indeed, if Mrs. Bladensbrook passed a bad night during those dark hours which intervened between the Rector’s departure from the House and the opening of the telegraph office in the morning, Margot kept her company. Not an eye did the girl close. She spent most of the

night, if the truth be told, sitting at the open window, huddled in a shawl and wondering what she should do if that link were made in the chain.

Immediately after breakfast the Rector trotted away to see how Mrs. Bladensbrook was getting on. Margot was dying to go with him, but under the circumstances she did not like to propose it, so she remained dawdling about the garden, pretending to do a dozen things and in reality occupied with nothing, her mind torn by a thousand emotions and full of anxiety. She almost flew to her father when he made his appearance. "Well, Daddy," she asked, "and what is the news?"

"News? My dear, there is next to none. The plot darkens, the mystery thickens. Mrs. Bladensbrook has had a long telegram from the adjutant of Godfrey's regiment and another long telegram from the landlord of the hotel where he was supposed to have been staying at Marley Spa. The adjutant says that he has been away for ten days; that he went to Marley Spa feeling not very well, and saying that a few days of the waters would do him good. His leave is up to-night. The landlord of the hotel at Marley Spa says that he paid for his rooms in advance for ten days; went several mornings to ask if there were any letters or telegrams, but that he has never slept there."

"And what does Mrs. Bladensbrook think?"

"'Pon my word, I don't know what she does think. I told her the best thing she can do is to wait a few days and see what Godfrey says for himself. He is not the kind of young man to

brook much interference; after all, he is a man out in the world, his own master, and, as I told Mrs. Bladensbrook, he is not accountable to her or anybody else for his comings and goings, and that the best thing to do would be to write to the regiment a letter which will await his return, and simply ask for an explanation of why he did not keep his promise to meet her in London."

"And what did Mrs. Bladensbrook say?" asked Margot, eagerly.

"Well, she was rather unreasonable about it," said the Rector. "You see I could not tell her so, seeing that she was in such a great state of distress and anxiety, but I hinted as much. Yes, I think she was decidedly unreasonable. You see she has brought up Godfrey from his early childhood to consider himself the most important person in his sphere, and for years past, long before he came into possession of his kingdom, she accustomed him to have the casting vote about everything, to be dominant, to judge for himself, and the fact that he has gone away for a few days without consulting her is quite what she might reasonably expect. Possibly he has hurt himself or met with some small accident, and he doesn't wish to worry her about it."

"But he would have telegraphed; he would have written saying why he did not go to meet her in London," said Margot.

"Well, that is what she says—yes, but still, he didn't go, did he? And that is just the long and short of it. I am quite sure that the best possible

thing to do is to wait patiently for a few days and see what the natural sequence of events will do in the matter."

And Mrs. Bladensbrook did wait for a few days, but no word or sign came from Godfrey, or indeed from any one else. Then she lost all patience, and set off to Blankhampton to see whether she could discover any trace of him herself. At the end of three days she wrote to the Rector, "I can find no trace of Godfrey whatever. I don't understand this mystery. I feel convinced that he has been murdered or got out of the road in some way. I have put the matter in the hands of the police, and the colonel of the regiment thinks that I am doing perfectly wisely. Most of Godfrey's things are at the hotel at Marley Spa, that is to say, most of the things which he seems to have taken with him from Blankhampton. They tell me that he was perfectly well in health, but complained the day before he asked for his leave of feeling not quite the thing. He started from Blankhampton to go to Marley Spa for a short course of the waters, but has never slept in the hotel. The rooms are paid for and his things are still there. The landlord has not the smallest idea whether he slept in the town or not. I can find no trace of him at the station. Nobody seems to have noticed anything about him, which seems very remarkable, as Godfrey is particularly noticeable in appearance. Some of his belongings are missing. I took his portmanteau and all the things that I found at the hotel at Marley Spa back to Blankhampton; and

his body-servant tells me that a similar portman-teau and several suits of clothing, together with his combs and brushes and other toilet appliances, are all missing."

It is almost impossible to describe with what mixed feelings Margot read this letter. She knew but too well that all Godfrey's toilet appliances had been destroyed in the railway accident. They had found the *débris* of certain ivory-backed brushes and such things in the shed at Ruxford; and Godfrey had pointed them out to her privately with a laugh at their ruined condition, but had not claimed them because of the crest and monogram emblazoned upon them. "It is no use claiming these," he said to her; "they are completely done for. And as I have given the name of Smith, it will be best not to claim anything with G. B. stamped on it, more particularly as you have claimed things marked with other initials than those under which you are passing."

After ten days or so, Mrs. Bladensbrook returned home no wiser than she had been when she left it. Apparently Godfrey had disappeared utterly and entirely; he had disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up; there was apparently no trace of him. It was as if he had vanished from off the face of the earth. The day after her return Mrs. Bladensbrook drove down to the Rectory in order to talk it all over, and to tell the Rector and Margot the very latest news, or want of news.

"If there were any reason for it," said Mrs.

Bladensbrook for about the twentieth time, when she had told them all that she knew or did not know; "if there were any reason for it, then it would be understandable enough; but Godfrey was not like other young men: he is so rich, so free in his circumstances; it is so unlike him. I cannot make it out. And really there is nothing about his rooms to show that he was mixed up in any way with anybody outside. His colonel and I looked over his letters—such as were lying about—and they were all the veriest and most unimportant trifles, invitations and such like. There are no signs of his being entangled in any way. There is a portrait of myself and Margot and your two boys and a set of photographs of Bladensbrook, but all things that he has had about him for years. I cannot understand it. And, of course, his leave is long since at an end. He is absent without leave, a grave military offence. It seems impossible that a Bladensbrook could deliberately absent himself when his leave was finished. What do you think, Margot?"

"I don't know what to think," said Margot, which was true enough.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT A DEAD END.

ALL the efforts of Mrs. Bladensbrook to elicit information about Godfrey's movements and whereabouts proved to be unavailing. So far as she was able to trace him herself just so far did the police go likewise, then the traces broke off sharp, and all her efforts and all those of the detectives whom she employed proved to be absolutely unavailing.

The weeks went by and the glorious summer weather waned into autumn. In due course of time Godfrey was gazetted as being superseded for absence without leave; then, indeed, did Mrs. Bladensbrook begin to realize that her son was irretrievably lost to her. "And yet," she said to Margot, "I cannot think that Godfrey is dead. I think if he were dead he would come back; he would find some means of letting me know what had happened to him. I feel sure that he would never leave me in this terrible anxiety and suspense. He would come; he would send some token; he would let me know somehow. Yet, why is he staying away? Or, if he finds it necessary, for some reason best known to himself, to throw over his whole career, to abandon everything that life has held for him up to now, why does he not set my mind at rest? Godfrey has always been so affectionate, so thoughtful, so con-

siderate for me before all, and, indeed, before everybody about him. I feel convinced, from the state of his papers, for every reason, that he left Blankhampton intending to return; that he had no thought of all this happening. Then, what about those notes?"

"What notes?" asked Margot.

"My dear, whilst he was at Marley Spa he went to the bank. He gave them a cheque for one hundred and thirty pounds, and he told them to get it cashed and that he would come for the money in a couple of days' time. He took the money—fifty pounds of it in bank-notes and eighty pounds in gold. Naturally, the numbers of those notes were taken before the clerk handed them to him; and, although they have communicated with every bank in England, not one of those notes has been traced or has come back. How do you account for that?"

Now, as Margot had the whole of the notes in her possession at that moment, she could have accounted for it very easily, but the possession of Godfrey's last letter was sufficient to make her keep the fact to herself.

"If Godfrey had been maltreated and robbed for the sake of that hundred and thirty pounds," Mrs. Bladensbrook went on, "the thieves would certainly have spent the money. Some of the notes would be in circulation by this time, but there is not a trace of any one of those notes to be found anywhere. How do you, I say, account for that?"

"I suppose whoever has them is afraid to pass them," said Margot.

"Well, if that is so, we shall probably never hear of them. They are probably destroyed long ago. But I want to know where is Godfrey? Why should Godfrey leave me like this? Why should he go against all the habits and customs of his life? I cannot make it out."

"Nor I," said Margot.

"And yet," Mrs. Bladensbrook went on, "I feel convinced that Godfrey is alive; that he is not dead. I shall always think that, unless I have actual proof of it."

Margot, however, had no opinion to offer on the subject of Godfrey's whereabouts or as to what had happened to him. If she had made a clean breast of it, that is to say of her own part in Godfrey's life, she could have told nothing except that he was certainly alive on the day previous to that whereon he was to have met his mother in London. His whereabouts she did not know nor whether he were actually alive or not, but her belief was that for some strange and mysterious reason of his own he was keeping out of sight. How long it would last, what the consequences would be, she had no notion; but in the face of Godfrey's last letter to her she unhesitatingly set herself to wait his time of disclosing the necessity for keeping silence. She was not exactly uneasy; she felt that Godfrey knew best what was the best both for her and for him; she was more than sorry for his mother's anxiety—and Mrs. Bladensbrook

was not a woman who bore anxiety well—yet she was firmly convinced that in any case it was not for her to interfere or to make even the smallest admission or disclosure.

The days wore on, and the people round about Bladensbrook began to lose interest somewhat in the fate of the master of the house. I do not mean the actual *entourage* of Bladensbrook, but the friends and acquaintances of the family for a few miles around. Mrs. Bladensbrook went nowhere; the continual fretting and anxiety told terribly upon her already indifferent health, and she denied herself to all visitors excepting the Rector and Margot; she went nowhere excepting sometimes to the Rectory to see the Rector when he was unable to go to the House. She took her drives within the confines of the estate; in short, she lived almost the life of a recluse.

“You have quite decided to go to the Pyrenees?” she said to Mr. Dangerfield one day when she had gone down to tea at the Rectory.

“It has been decided for me,” said the Rector, gently.

“Oh, is that so? And how is that?”

“Well, it has been decided that I ought to go into a milder climate, somewhere where the air is mild and pure. I am tired of the Riviera, and I don’t want to go to Italy. I feel as if the Pyrenees would suit us very well, and the doctors are imperative that I should be away from England in less than a fortnight.”

“I envy you,” said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"But why need you envy us? Why cannot you go, too? Change of scene and seeing people who know nothing of your anxiety would be very good for you."

"I cannot leave Bladensbrook. I must stay at home. I should not have an easy moment. Oh, no; don't suggest such a thing as my going away."

"My dear lady," said the old Rector, gently, "as your good friend of many years, I do suggest it. I beg you to think of it. I feel it would be the wisest course that you could take. It isn't like the old times; you would be in telegraphic communication with your own people the whole time."

But Mrs. Bladensbrook shook her head in that gentle yet decided way which, as the Rector well knew, indicated that it was useless for him to say another word on the subject. "I should not be happy away from Bladensbrook," she said, simply; "not at present, at all events. Perhaps I may come and join you later. In the meantime I must stay here and keep my stewardship. I am convinced that Godfrey is not dead."

"I hope not, indeed," said the Rector, fervently.

Then Mrs. Bladensbrook took her leave and went home again; Margot going with her to the carriage and seeing her safely into it."

"Poor woman," said the Rector, when Margot went back to the fireside, "how she clings to the mere chance of the boy being still alive. It only shows how the most sensible people can deceive themselves when their hearts lead them in a certain

direction. I am afraid there is little chance of Godfrey Bladensbrook ever coming back to his own again."

"Then you think he is dead, Daddy?" said Margot.

"I should say that there is every probability of it. Most likely he has been put out of the road for the sake of the bit of money and the few jewels he had about him. One thing is certain, at least to my mind, were he alive he would never leave his mother, to whom he has always been so devoted, in such anxiety and suspense. Besides, what reason can he possibly have for deliberately losing himself, as would be the case if her theory was a right one? No, no; that poor boy has been got out of sight, and it is a thousand chances to one that the end will ever be accurately known. Perhaps it is better for her, poor soul, that she should cling to this hope, for it will accustom her to being without him, and will certainly deaden the blow when it does fall."

"I don't believe that blow will fall," said Margot, in a trembling voice.

"Ah, no, your heart goes out to the poor mother. Women are all alike, young and old; they hope for what they wish; men learn only to hope for what is possible."

Eventually it was decided that the Rector and Margot should make Pau their immediate destination, and within the time stipulated by the doctors they left the Rectory. Mrs. Bladensbrook came down to see them the previous afternoon, and then

the Rector unfolded to her an idea which was troubling him not a little. "There is something on my mind which I wanted to consult you about," he said to her. "You have said several times lately that you were so glad that I have managed to persuade Mr. Morris to remain here as curate, that he might have sole charge during my winter absence."

"Yes, I think it an excellent thing; far better than getting a *locum tenens*," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, decidedly.

"You like Morris, don't you?"

"Very much, indeed," she replied.

"Don't you think," said the Rector, "that in common justice I ought to resign the living?"

"No, I do not," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "I don't think so at all."

"But, dear lady, is it quite fair to go on when I have to be months and months away and can take but little active part in the work of the parish?"

"My dear Rector," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "I think I am right in saying that not a man, woman, or child in the whole of Bladensbrook parish but would be bitterly grieved if you were to leave it. It would be time enough if ever you were taken away to think of your successor; while you are alive I hope that nothing, not even a bishopric, would induce you to turn your back upon us."

"I shall never have that inducement, Mrs. Bladensbrook," said he, smiling; "they don't make bishops of such men as I am. They don't take Derby winners off the cab rank."

"No, no; I was speaking figuratively. But pray do put any idea of leaving right out of your head. In the first place, Godfrey is away, and a new Rector could not be appointed without him."

"I thought you held Godfrey's power of attorney?"

"So I do; but I do not consider that my powers go so far as the presentation of a living."

"I believe they do in law," said the Rector.

"Well, whether you believe that or not, I beg that you will say no more about it. You will make me very unhappy if you suggest anything of the kind. Mr. Morris is very nice, very dear, very sympathetic, a good worker, everybody likes him, but he is not our own old Rector, and we cannot spare you. We cannot have you for the whole year because your health demands otherwise; we prefer to have you while we can than to have you not all. I entreat you to say nothing more about it."

So, with a sigh, it must be admitted of infinite relief, the Rector put the subject away from his mind. In his own heart he knew that it would not be very long before there would be no question about the choice of a new Rector for Bladensbrook. There are certain diseases which in the ordinary course of events must come to an end sooner or later, and Mr. Dangerfield knew perfectly well that the time was not very far distant when that contingency would present itself necessitously before Mrs. Bladensbrook's mind. Still, he loved every stick and stone, every yard of turf, every tree and

shrub about the Rectory in which he had been so happy and so supremely contented; and it was a threefold joy to him to feel that he might linger out his last few years in that well-loved spot without feeling that he was looked upon as a cumberer of the ground.

And with what a sinking heart did Margot prepare for her journey. It would indeed be hard for me to describe. As every day went past, hope seemed to recede further and further from her, and an awful unfathomable dread of the future to press closer and closer upon her, looming in front of her, tall, dark, foreboding, a something that could not be excised or frightened away; a something planted immovably in front of her; a something which could only be lived through day by day and hour by hour. She had a feeling that it would not be safe for her to carry those bank-notes on their expedition. She therefore packed them together with Godfrey's last letter into a fresh parcel, which she secured with many seals, on the back of which she wrote, "In case of my death, this parcel is to be burned unopened," and this she locked away in a large dressing-case which had belonged to her mother, and which she never took abroad with her on account of its size and weight. This box she in turn hid away at the bottom of her largest wardrobe, which she carefully locked, carrying the key with her; thus she felt that there would be no excuse for any person or persons who came into her room to tamper in any way with the box containing the sealed packet.

"I am afraid, Margot," said Mrs. Bladensbrook that last afternoon, "that you are much more anxious about your father than he has any idea of."

"I am very anxious about him," said Margot, looking away from Mrs. Bladensbrook and out over the dull, wintry landscape.

"I can see it, dear. I know you are. My heart aches for you. You are too young to have such anxiety pressing upon you. Ah, if only your aunt, Mrs. Blake, were more genial, more kindly, how much she could take off your young shoulders."

"We are much happier without Aunt Marcia," said Margot, decidedly.

"Yes, dear, I have no doubt you are; but still it is too much for you. You look so ill, so worried. You know, dear child, I really don't think that the Rector is any worse than he has been for several years past."

"Don't you?" said Margot. "I think Daddy is very much worse. He does less; he exerts himself less; he eats less; he sits longer at a time doing nothing. Oh, I think Daddy is very much changed."

"And you dread going away with him so far?"

"A little," said Margot.

"Well, dear child, if he should be very ill, you know you need only send for me and I will come to you. I don't feel that I can go now. My place is here; my duty to Godfrey imperatively bids me stay where I am, and, besides those considerations, I should be wretched away from home; but if the Rector were very ill, if you felt that you must

have somebody with you, that would be different ; and you must not hesitate to send for me, and I would start at an hour's notice."

"How good you are," said Margot, in a trembling voice. "Why should you be so good to us?"

"Because I have loved you all for years and years and years," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, looking at her sadly. "My own life has not been so happy as to make me indifferent to the sorrows of others. You know, dear, I lost the best and dearest husband in the world without a moment's notice. He was quite a young man, and I little more than a girl. I was very anxious during my boy's young days ; anxious to do the best for him in every sense, and until now, Godfrey has never given me an hour's anxiety in his life. I don't think he is dead ; I believe that he will come back again. I believe he will explain everything to my perfect satisfaction. I will trust him through all and in spite of all. But still, here I am, a lonely woman, feeble in health, anxious in mind and very sorrowful. Can you wonder that I feel towards you, dear child, as if you were my own little daughter ? Surely not."

"Oh, *don't*," cried Margot ; "oh, don't say that, Mrs. Bladensbrook ! I am very unhappy. I—I—don't feel that you ought to say that to me. I am not the girl that you think me, and I am afraid that some day you may see me as I really am."

CHAPTER XVII.

A QUESTION.

FOR several months after the departure of the Rector and Margot for their winter resting-place, life went on at Bladensbrook with a monotony which to the anxious woman in possession there was little short of maddening. Margot wrote to her every week, sometimes more often than that, giving her the latest news of her father and discussing odds and ends of information concerning the parish as Mrs. Bladensbrook from time to time had mentioned in her letters. "Daddy is certainly very much better," she wrote, when they had been there some three or four weeks; "very, very much better. You would hardly know him for the same person. He has taken to golfing, and seems to be out all day long. Indeed, I look at him sometimes in absolute wonder." She then went on to give various little sketches of the people whose acquaintance they had made, and with whom they were the most intimate, and also of those who were the most marked figures in the bright little town where they were sojourning.

Between Mrs. Bladensbrook and the curate, Mr. Morris, a great friendship had sprung up. The curate was a young man of some property, very much alone in the world, and of very pronounced and dominant character. Short of a living of his

own, his cure at Bladensbrook suited him as probably no other cure in the world would have done. So long as he did not offend the lady of the soil or wound the susceptibilities of the poorer folk, Mr. Dangerfield left him a free hand, and he was therefore able to make many improvements and changes; facts which are not always synonymous. To Mrs. Bladensbrook his friendship was peculiarly welcome. He had seen and admired Godfrey, and was especially sympathetic when she spoke to him of her anxiety and her hopes and fears; to everyone else she was absolutely silent on the subject; even the steward was afraid to mention the young squire other than as if he were but putting in time with his regiment. Mrs. Bladensbrook always settled every question in some such way as, "I think Mr. Bladensbrook would like that," or "I feel quite sure that Mr. Bladensbrook would approve of that." "We must do so-and-so for the present and settle the question definitely when Mr. Bladensbrook returns." There were times when the poor steward thought that the lady's head was a little turned by her troubles, but he no more dared have spoken of it to her than he dared have struck her in the face.

"It seems so hard," she said one day to the curate when he had been dining with her and they were left alone at the table together, "it seems so hard, when there are so many bad husbands and sons, that mine, who were both good, should have been taken away from me. I assure you I never had an indifferent word from my husband in my

life. There was never one moment, from first to last, when my interests were not his interests and his interests mine. As for Godfrey, from the time he was a baby he never gave me a moment's uneasiness until now. Why, I assure you he got his teeth without our even knowing it. It seems so strange that these two should be taken and so many bad ones left."

"And it is strange," said the curate, "it is most strange, Mrs. Bladensbrook. But you are still convinced that your son is——"

"Living?" she ended as he hesitated. "More convinced of it than ever; perfectly assured that in time he will explain everything to my full satisfaction, and yet I can't help worrying and fretting and thinking about him. I feel, when I lie awake in the night and wonder where he is and what he is doing, I feel as if I am insulting him by having even a qualm, even a doubt; and yet the qualms and the doubts and the fears are there, and sometimes I can see my people look at me and I can see writ plain on their faces that they think I am mad."

"Oh, no, no!"

"Yes, yes," speaking very sadly. "I was consulting with the agent this morning about some improvements; he knew his place too well to say so, but I could see pity and commiseration stamped on every line of his face; it rang in every tone of his voice; he was so sorry for me, and he thinks I am a little mad. Now you know I am not a bit mad; as a matter of fact, I am a hard-headed, sensible woman, with no more madness about me than

a conviction of something to come. Tell me truly, do you think that Godfrey is alive?"

"I don't know. You see I don't know him as you do, and yet I confess I think you are right. I think that you would never have such a conviction without some ground for it, and I would prefer to trust your judgment in such a matter rather than my own under the circumstances."

"I am glad of that," said Mrs. Bladensbrook in a tone of satisfaction, "because it tells me that you do not think that my belief is a sign of my mind being diseased. Somehow, I don't like people to think that I am not right in my head. It is a dreadful feeling; I dislike it very much. However, what others think is no matter to me. When Godfrey comes home again, they will all say, 'Ah, she is a wonderful woman; she said he was not dead.' They will all think I have some marvellous power of second-sight, people are so silly."

They left the table presently and went into the cosy smaller drawing-room, which Mrs. Bladensbrook particularly affected as her own especial sanctum. There they drank their coffee, and then Mr. Morris showed his hostess a particularly new and intricate form of Patience, a game of which she was exceedingly fond. She used to say that she loved Patience in any form because she could play it by herself and think at the same time. "I never was much of a sewing-woman," she said as she turned the cards out of their inlaid box and began shuffling them with her handsome jewelled fingers. "I never could see the virtue of making holes to

stitch them up again. If I want lace, I buy lace ; if I want embroidery, I buy embroidery ; but to ruin my eyesight, spoil my digestion, and fret my temper by trying to do something that I know I could never do well is not my idea of proper occupation. I read the papers, look after the estate, write a good many letters, and play Patience. It has saved me many a time from getting down into the very slough of despond. Now, there are the cards ; show me this wonderful new game of yours."

The curate took one pack from her, saying, "It only needs a single pack. You deal thirteen cards into a heap," he said, "then place four for the columns and one as the turn-up for the base cards, then you pile downwards for the columns alternately red and black, upwards for the bases in their own suits. You turn your rubbish heap as many times as you like until you can get no more cards out, and you turn them three at a time."

"It sounds rather intricate," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Do you play a game and I will watch you. I shall learn the quickest that way."

He played for a little while in comparative silence, only pointing out to her points in the game such as "You see you always play to the bases." "You see you always fill up from the pack, never from the rubbish heap. If a similar card is on the top of the pack, your object is to diminish this. Yes, that seven goes on that eight and then a black six. Do you see?"

"I see," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "It looks quite easy. You are doing it the first time."

"I have not done it yet," said the curate. He played a little longer in silence and finally came to a stop. "There's just a chance," he said, "but only one. I may now take a single card off any of the bases, if it will fit on to one of the columns, and so relieve the congestion. See, I will take that four and put it on this five." Ah, it is no use."

"But you are nearly done?"

"But I am not quite done," said he, smiling; "that is where the demon comes in. It is well called 'Demon Patience.' I have often tried a dozen times to do it, and failed each time when it has seemed just within my grasp. Believe me, my dear lady, it is the one form of Patience which puts all the others into the shade; it is the one form of which one never tires; it is always interesting, always fresh, always tantalizing."

"But you can do it sometimes?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Oh, yes, sometimes, but not very often."

She took the other pack, then, and began to play the game herself, the curate watching her and throwing in a word of advice now and again. She failed, however, to carry the game to a satisfactory conclusion. "It is a game!" she exclaimed, when she found she could go no further. "I am most obliged to you, Mr. Morris, for telling me of it. It will keep me amused many an hour when I cannot keep my attention to a book or a paper, and it is rightly called 'Demon Patience.' It is a demon." She began to shuffle the cards and to deal them out again, idly, almost unthinkingly. "I had a

letter from Margot Dangerfield to-day," she observed, casually.

"Oh, yes? I hope the Rector is going on well. I have not heard for several days,—well, for nearly a week."

"She says that he is greatly better, wonderfully better; and she writes more brightly, more about the people whom they are among and of the place, and so on. A charming girl, Mr. Morris."

"A very charming girl," said the curate, looking at the cards and not at Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"I have known her ever since she was born—she was born in the Rectory, you know. I have seen her grow up, a wee toddling thing, ruling those two big boys and my Godfrey with a rod of iron. She is a good girl, a dear girl. I know of no unmarried, feminine person so gentle, so sweet, so reliable and dependable as little Margot. Godfrey was exceedingly fond of her—I don't mean in that way; of course, if he had chosen to make her his wife I should have said nothing. He was perfectly free to follow his own bent. Of course, he might have looked higher, but there was never anything of that kind between them. She was his dear little sister, and he, just like the two boys, a big brother to her. I have a very high opinion of Margot Dangerfield."

"I admire her very much," said the curate, "very much, indeed; more than any young lady I have seen here at all."

"The girls hereabouts are not especially nice," said Mrs. Bladensbrook in rather a freezing tone. "It would have been a great grief to me if my son

had ever contemplated marrying any daughter of the people surrounding us. They mostly seem to me a little underbred, and—well, perhaps, I had better not say that, but I don't like the manners of the girls of to-day too well. I prefer my little Margot; she is the essence of good breeding. She was always so. As a tiny little toddling child in short frocks and socks she was always the same perfect little lady. Do you put that king on the ace?"

"Yes, for the columns always."

"I see. Margot was very much down about her father before they left home. I think she had an idea that he was very much worse than he really is. She said as much to me; but I never thought that the Rector was so very ill. Of course, he was ill enough to take care, ill enough to be careful what he was doing, but that is all; and Mr. Dangerfield is getting a good age; he must be sixty-two or three, perhaps a little more."

"And Miss Dangerfield is feeling happier about him?"

"Oh, very much so, very much so, indeed. She writes quite blithely, more like her old self. They were very anxious that I should go to Pau with them; but I felt that my place was here. I felt that I should be unhappy and wretched away from home until I hear from Godfrey. Mr. Morris," she said suddenly, and with a change of tone and clasping her hands nervously together on the edge of the table, "where do you think my son is?"

"Ah, that is beyond me," said the curate, shaking his head.

"I have thought, sometimes," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "that I would run up to London and see a clairvoyant. Tell me, do you think there is anything in it?"

"I don't know," said the curate, "I don't know. Sometimes I think there must be. You know Shakespeare says, 'There are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in thy philosophy.' Soothsayers and seers have been believed in from the time of earliest history. I don't think that there would be so general a belief if there were not at least something in it. Whether the people whom you employ professionally are to be depended upon is another question. Of course, up in Scotland, away in the Highlands, where the second sight is an undoubted gift, and where the seer only speaks when he sees, it is apparently reliable; but these people to whom you go and pay five or ten shillings, how are you to know that they see anything, that the whole thing is not a humbug?"

"True; and yet, if one said, if one bargained, that if they saw nothing they should be honest and say so, what then?"

"I don't know," said the curate; "it might do; but the difficulty is to get reliable information."

"You would not be utterly shocked if you knew that I had gone to town for that purpose?"

"My dear lady," said the curate, looking at her straight in the eyes, "I should not be shocked at any fair means by which you strove to satisfy your anxiety. If it would comfort you to go to some

clairvoyant and ask for information concerning your son, far be it from me to say one word that would stop you. If these people have such a power, God above gave it to them."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SORROW OF OTHERS.

MRS. BLADENSBROOK, however, did not call in the good offices of a clairvoyant. The wind was cold and bleak, and she was a good deal troubled by the bronchial affection which had been hanging about her for several years. The effort of going to London was more than she felt inclined to face, and so she stayed at Bladensbrook, living a quiet, anxious, monotonous life. So far as Bladensbrook itself was concerned, the management of affairs went on precisely as they had done at any time since the death of Godfrey's father. The household was managed in precisely the same way, except that there was provision for no visitors made beyond a single cover, which was always laid for Mr. Morris. "You will always find a cover laid for you," said Mrs. Bladensbrook soon after the Dangerfields had gone abroad. "I am never out; I have never any other visitors. You will never find yourself *de trop* or anything but welcome, therefore, at any time when you wish to see me, or when you think it would be a charity to come and relieve my loneliness, remember

that you need no invitation, that your chair is always set ready for you."

Mr. Morris availed himself very often of Mrs. Bladensbrook's invitation. He liked her, he respected her, he admired her, and he was intensely sorry for the thick cloud of apparently impenetrable anxiety and sorrow which at present overshadowed her. He consulted her about most of the parish work, and her charity was bestowed through his hands. Mrs. Bladensbrook had always been very much the great lady to the poor people on the estate. No widows and orphans went begging in Bladensbrook, the old were never hustled into the workhouse, old age there was an honourable estate to be cared for rather than to be spurned, widows were helped to help themselves, aye, and helped substantially and with sound, practical common sense; but Mrs. Bladensbrook had never been in the habit of trotting in and out of the cottages as so many Ladies Bountiful do, pleased to have their people make a fuss of them, pleased to sit down on the newly-dusted chair and hear all the latest news of the family, and gather a great deal of gossip as they go along; Mrs. Bladensbrook had never been that kind of woman. She had been just, firm, kind, but decided, and, now that the greatest sorrow of her life had fallen upon her, she did not unbend from her former habits; on the contrary, she became to all those outside her own house more distant and unapproachable than she had been before.

It happened, one day, that Mr. Morris walked up to the House in time for dinner. Mrs. Bladens-

brook had just come down into the little drawing-room after changing her morning dress for a velvet tea-gown. "Oh, is that you?" she said, as she perceived that she had a visitor. "I am so glad to see you. I have been feeling so dull and so lonely all the day, and with this bitter wind I was afraid to venture outside the door. I was in two minds whether to send down to you or not to beg you to come and take some dinner with me."

"And I have come most opportunely to beg for that very thing," said the big parson, taking her hand and holding it between both of his. "I have a sad story to tell you."

"About Godfrey?"

"Oh, no; would that I had. No, it is about another widow who is in trouble for her only child, her only son."

"Ah, that is ——?"

"That is Mrs. Daniels."

"Mrs. Daniels at the Fir Cottage? Oh, I am sorry to hear that."

"And I, too. It seems that young Daniels was caught poaching last night, and he is in prison."

"Young Daniels? Impossible."

"It seems impossible. His mother declares that there is not the slightest foundation for it. He was caught red-handed,—well, no, not exactly that; he was caught coming through the wood. He declared he had been to see his sweetheart; but he won't give up her name because her father is against the marriage. Her father thinks that she is a cut above him, and that a mere labouring-man with an

aged mother has no right to look at any girl, at least not this particular girl. She had been to meet him unknown to her father, and, rather than give up her name, he prefers to take a punishment for a crime which he swears he has not committed."

"You have seen him?"

"Yes; I went and saw him in the lock-up this morning. He is very firm, looked me straight in the face, declared that the mistress would know he was incapable of poaching; traps were discovered, game was found in them, but young Daniels says the traps are not his, and he had no knowledge of their being there. His presence was a pure accident. He declares that you will never believe him guilty of anything of the kind. 'Why should I want to poach?' he said; 'I have no wife nor child, and as for the old mother, if she fancied a chicken or she fancied a rabbit, I have but to speak to the mistress, and I know she would have it.'"

"That is true enough," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"His mother is coming up in the morning. The magistrates do not sit for two days. His mother believes that she will be able to put things right if she can get speech of you. I assure you, Mrs. Bladensbrook, the poor old soul was very pathetic, very noble in her distress, very straight in her glance, very confident of your being above ordinary suspiciousness and mischief-making. 'I will go and see Madam in the morning,' said she. 'Madam will know better than to be influenced by them game-keepers; Madam knows them that

have served her and hers for generations. I am not afraid of Madam's mind being poisoned.' "

"Poor soul!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Yes, I will certainly see her in the morning when she comes, and young Daniels won't feel much the worse for having been kept in the lock-up for a couple of days. I will see that it is made right."

So, when Mrs. Daniels came up to the house the following morning, dressed in decent black and with a warm winter shawl which had been Mrs. Bladensbrook's own gift to her, she was shown straight into the morning-room where the mistress of the house was sitting. "Ah, is that you, Mrs. Daniels?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, as the old woman stood courtesying before her; "I hear that you are in trouble about your son."

On this the old woman poured out her tale. Mrs. Bladensbrook listened kindly enough, and bade her sit down on a chair just on the other side of the fireplace. "And they say that George was poaching?" she said, when the voluble tongue at last came to an end of the recital.

"Oh, my lady, they do, they do indeed, but there's not a word of truth in it," cried the old woman. "Why should my son be wanting to poach? He is in regular work and gets good money, and it isn't much of a burden that I am to him. Thanks to Madam's kindness, I have my cottage and my coals and my bread and my joint of beef every week from the butcher; what more can I want? As for rabbits and pheasants and such-like, I am hale and hearty, and I have not

been used to such things. I am not over-fond of them. As for George, why, my boy can eat anything. He gets plenty of good meat, and a better son never stepped, Madam, that I assure you."

"He won't give up the name of this girl?"

"Well, Madam, how can I ask him to do it? How could he give it up? Her father would be fit to kill her if he knew. She is above my George—not too good for him, my George is good enough for anybody, my lady—but her father is a man of money and a man of solid position, and he is wild with her for liking my boy better than some others. He'd be fit to kill her, my lady, if he knew."

"Well, I am glad to hear that there are young men who will think of their sweethearts first and themselves afterwards," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, very kindly; "all men ought to do so, Mrs. Daniels; but I am afraid that a great many men do not see the necessity of that. I will see the magistrates or I will write. I will see them, if possible. The Court sits——?"

"To-morrow. To-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, my lady."

"I shall probably go down myself. I will take care that he has my good word, in any case. You see I am troubled with my chest, and I have something here," pointing to her chest; "if it is very cold to-morrow, I shall be obliged to write; but I will do something. And how is the rheumatism?"

"Well, my lady, it is——well, to tell you the truth, I had forgotten all about my rheumatism.

I've been so anxious these few hours about George. But it is there, my lady ; yes, it is still there ; and it will be there until I am dead and gone."

"It won't be there then," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, smiling. "Well, then, you may go down and let your son know that I shall speak for him ; and you must go and have a glass of wine with Mrs. Moore." She rang the bell as she spoke and told the servant who answered it to take Mrs. Daniels into the house-keeper's room and give her a glass of wine and some cake. "And do you keep up a good heart about the matter. I shall speak for your son."

The footman went out of the room and the old woman turned back to the lady of the house. "My lady," she said, in a shaking voice, "I came to you in the blackest hour of my life. I am poor, but I am honest, and you have lifted a load off my heart such as may you never know the feeling of. God bless you, my lady."

Mrs. Bladensbrook laid her white, jewelled hand upon the old woman's shawl-covered shoulder. "There, there," she said, gently, "perhaps I know the feeling of such a burden as well as you do. I have a son, too, and I know not whether all is well with him or not. Pray for me, my good soul, that is the kindest thing you can do," and then she turned back to the fire, and the old woman stumbled out of the room too blinded by her tears to see quite where she was going. Mrs. Bladensbrook stood looking into the fire, contrasting her lot with that of the old widow and thinking how

very near their common human interests had brought them. "Her son is to her what Godfrey is to me. She trusts him implicitly because she judges him out of the past. I know that my boy has some good reason for his silence. I will trust him, also."

Later in the day she received a long letter from Margot Dangerfield which brought the sad news that the Rector had taken a turn for the worse. "Father is very ill," wrote Margot, "and the doctors seem to think that his complaint had made great strides forward during the past fortnight. He seemed so well, so strong, so gay, so full of spirits and energy, that I fancied he was going to get over it and be his old self again. The doctor doesn't put it into plain English, but he gives me to understand that he had not regarded his apparent improvement in health as a good sign, rather that it was a flicker in the socket. I am so lonely and so frightened here alone among all these strangers. Though they are very kind and good to me, still they are not like one's own people. Aunt Marcia is in Naples, and Father is particularly averse to my sending for her. He says she would worry him to death. Dear Mrs. Bladensbrook, you said before we left home that if he was worse you would come to me; will you keep that promise now if it is not impossible to you? I want somebody to lean on. You are so strong, so full of courage, you always know what to do in every emergency; but I am so young, so ignorant of sickness, I get more frightened every hour. If only you would come out to

me I should bless you so. You don't know the load it would take off my mind."

Mrs. Bladensbrook laid the letter down with a very grave face. "I am afraid that poor child has a very sad experience before her," her thoughts ran. "Of course, I must go out there. I can't leave her alone to face what is coming. Ah, is that you, Matthew? Yes, I am glad of my tea. Matthew, I have just had a letter from Miss Dangerfield. The Rector is very ill; I am afraid we shall never see him here again."

"I am sorry to hear that, Madam," said Matthew, with genuine regret in face and tone. "I thought the Rector looked as if he was breaking up the very last time he dined here."

"And poor Miss Margot is all alone with him—all alone, Matthew. She seems very nervous and very excited. I think that I shall be obliged to go and look after them a little."

"Well, M'm, if you go, there's no doubt the poor young lady will be helped through it in the best possible way. It's a dreadful time of the year to take such a journey, and with your browntitis, too. Don't you think, M'm, that I had better go along with you? Me and Perkins will be able to take care of you all right."

"Well, Matthew, I don't know that that would not be a good plan. Besides that, you might be a great deal of comfort to the dear Rector. I think you had better make your arrangements, and be sure that you leave everything here in train so that Robert knows exactly what to do if Mr. Bladens-

brook comes home during my absence. You can arrange everything—can you not?—without leaving too much in Robert's hands?"

"Oh, yes, M'm, of course I can. That is a simple matter. I can leave the principal keys with Mrs. Moore; everything will be safe with her."

"Then, Matthew, I think you had better make all your arrangements. We will try and start to-morrow afternoon, and we can get across to-morrow evening. I cannot go by the earliest train because young Daniels is in trouble, and I must go down to the Court House and speak to the magistrates for him. You might send down to the Rectory by and by—now—and ask Mr. Morris if he could come up and dine with me to-night. I can then talk over with him anything that he wishes done, anything that he wishes said to the Rector. To-morrow I shall be so busy I shall not have time for a word with anyone."

"I will send down at once, M'm," said Matthew, settling the tea-tray to his entire satisfaction. "Shall I mention it to Perkins when she comes to tea, M'm?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. She can come to see me when she has had her tea; she can come in here to me. And, Matthew, send off a telegram at once to Miss Dangerfield at the St. Antoine Hotel, Pau, France, and say that I am coming to her at once and will start from London to-morrow evening."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE QUIET END.

As soon as Mrs. Bladensbrook arrived at Pau she saw that the Rector was a great deal worse in health than even Margot had any idea of; she saw, indeed, that his days were numbered, and that the number of them was but few. He was sitting near the window in a large chair with pillows behind him and a rug over his knees. Mrs. Bladensbrook went up to him and took his hand. "Why, my dear old friend," she said, in as bright a tone as she could assume, "how comes it that I find you like this? I have changed my mind and come out for a little holiday, and I find you have suddenly got ill, just when you ought to have been as well as possible, so as to give me a good time. It is really very inconsiderate of you. I am afraid you have been committing some indiscretion or other."

"I don't think I have," said the Rector; "I have been very queer for a few days now, but I am glad you have come. Margot is nervous and not up to very much in the way of sick nursing; she looks pale and anxious and worried, and she thinks I am going to die right off."

"Oh, come, you are not going to do that," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, decidedly.

"Oh, no, no; I shall hang on a little while. I

don't think, all the same, that I shall ever see Bladensbrook again."

"Oh, nonsense! You mustn't say that. Bladensbrook is there, and you must come back to it. We cannot do without you. Now that I have come, mind you are to be very good. I have brought Perkins with me. Perkins is an excellent nurse, and Perkins will have no mercy on you; when Perkins brings you beef-tea, you will have to drink it; when Perkins says it is time for your medicine, there is no disputing the point; when Perkins says it is time to go to bed, to bed you go, as if you were a child of two years old."

"Oh, yes, I will do all that. It is very kind of you to take any interest in me. I have about run my course, and you know that as well as I do."

"Well, well, we will not give way for the sake of the child. Remember, you will leave your little girl alone,—or almost alone,—and you must keep a good heart and be brave for her sake. You would not like to leave her to some people—Aunt Marcia, for instance?"

"No, I should not; and that is one reason why I am so anxious to see you and have a talk with you before—before—anything does happen. If I do not get over this—and I don't think I shall—I should like to lie in the little God's acre here. I feel as if I should rest better in this pure air with the sunshine always shining down upon my grave. Don't carry me home, I would rather be left where I am. And about my will, I have made a new will, but I have said nothing about the guardianship of

the child. Would it be asking you too much if—if—I asked you to undertake that office?”

“I will be Margot’s guardian with pleasure,” said Mrs. Bladensbrook, gently. “Margot and I know one another very well, and I think we are fond of one another, and I doubt if it would be for very long. I will do it with pleasure, will do anything which will make you feel happier in your mind or more comfortable concerning her.”

“That is very good of you,” said the Rector.

“But, you know,” Mrs. Bladensbrook went on, assuming a brighter tone, “you may be giving us all this scare for nothing. I have very little faith in you, Rector, very little faith. You have cried ‘wolf’ so many times, and we think you may be mistaken this time.”

“Well, I may be,” said the Rector, “I may be; but I doubt it. I think the doctor chap will tell you the same thing. I am booked, my dear lady. However, now that my mind is made easy about Margot, I may as well tell you that I am almost indifferent one way or the other. It is a great effort going on living when one is very ill; when one has to think of every morsel one eats, and every place where one chooses to sit down, and every habit that one has, it is scarcely worth the trouble, and I shall not be sorry to go, though, true, I have one great regret in leaving you all, which is that I have not finished my great book.”

“I wouldn’t trouble about the book,” said Mrs. Bladensbrook, who had a very small opinion of the value of architectural embellishments.

They brought up tea and fruit, and she sat there in the pleasant afternoon, entertaining the invalid with all the latest news of the village which they both loved so dearly. She ended by telling him of the trouble with young Daniels, and how she had had herself to go to the Court House to give him a character, and, as he was suspected of poaching her game, to declare her belief in his innocence. "You know, of course, game-keepers and such people are very pig-headed, and I am almost afraid that there has been a certain amount of jealousy at work. You see, young Daniels is very respectable, and his mother is a woman who keeps herself very much to herself; and Lennard, who, of course, is an excellent game-keeper and quite a valuable servant, would like to have Mrs. Daniels's house for his young son, who is going to be married—you know, the under-keeper."

"Oh, yes, yes; that would be a very comfortable arrangement."

"Now, Mrs. Daniels's husband was in our employment—oh, well, long before I came on the scene—and I am quite sure nothing would have displeased my husband so much as to know that she was turned out of the cottage, whether for a game-keeper or an under-keeper or anybody else; and Godfrey, of course, feels precisely the same."

"And you have news of Godfrey?" said the Rector, turning his haggard face towards her.

"No, I have no news. I have not heard a word. If I had not such trust and confidence in

Godfrey, I should have begun to despair long before this."

"You still believe that he is alive?"

"Oh, yes, and also that he has a good reason for his extraordinary silence."

"It is a great thing for Godfrey," said the Rector, "that he has a mother who can trust in him implicitly in the face of all apparent evidence to the contrary. I have thought a great deal about him since we left home, and especially since I have been a prisoner in this room. I hope you are right."

"I feel sure I am right," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"I hope so; for I have known and liked Godfrey ever since he was a baby; and yet it seems so inexplicable; it seems so unlike him. I cannot make it out."

"Nor I," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

One of the great advantages of having taken Matthew with her to Pau lay in the fact that he was able to while away time with the Rector as, perhaps, nobody else could have done. "You know, dear Rector," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, two or three days after her arrival, "the child is looking very ill."

"I think she is worried to death," said the Rector, "here in a strange land, and my being so ill, and really so unexpectedly ill. I think she got frightened and nervous."

"Well, yes, I thought so too; but she is looking ill. I don't like that drawn look she has at all.

You must let me take her out for a few drives and give her as much fresh air as possible."

"Oh, yes; do, do," said the Rector; "I shall be all right. By the bye, Matthew could come and talk to me. Matthew could come and play cribbage with me. I believe Matthew is a first-rate hand at cribbage."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, who had that kind of faith in Matthew which was ready to credit him with any accomplishment. She took an opportunity, an hour or so later, of sounding Matthew upon the subject of cribbage. "Matthew," she said, "can you play cribbage?"

"Oh, yes, M'm; I am reckoned a very good cribbage player."

"Well, now, I tell you what, my good Matthew, you shall do. I am feeling very uneasy about Miss Dangerfield. She looks so ill, so drawn, I think the anxiety of her father's condition has told upon her terribly. I am going to take her about a little, to get a few drives, to give her fresh air, and to distract her thoughts somewhat from the trial that lies before her, and you can stop with the Rector and play cribbage with him. He loves it; he is very anxious that Miss Dangerfield should be distracted a little from her present sad surroundings."

"Very good, M'm."

Accordingly that very afternoon Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot went for a long drive together. "I want to see colour in those pale cheeks, Mar-

got," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, looking at her critically. Margot flushed a vivid scarlet. "Nay, child, there's nothing to blush at," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Your poor looks are but natural in the face of all the anxiety and strain that you have been suffering; but, now that I have come to relieve you, I will take care that you get more fresh air and more distraction than you have had so far. You will need it all," she said, in a lower tone.

"Oh, indeed, yes; I know that I shall need it all," said Margot.

They had turned homewards again before Margot ventured to ask a question which had been trembling on her lips ever since Mrs. Bladensbrook's arrival. "You have no news of Godfrey, Mrs. Bladensbrook?"

"None, my dear, none. He is as silent as if the grave had opened and swallowed him; more silent, indeed; because I feel convinced that if he were dead he would have come back just to let me know. I cannot make it out. I have suffered dreadfully since you left home; Bladensbrook is like a graveyard to me—full of broken hopes."

The two drove together every day, sometimes twice, but it cannot be said that much colour came back into Margot's cheeks, or that she looked less ill than she had done for some little time past. She stayed a great deal with her father when Mrs. Bladensbrook did not carry her off in the carriage, playing all manner of games with him, and often reading aloud to him from the lighter journals of

the day. And so the time wore on, with each day the Rector growing weaker and weaker, less able to do anything for himself, not suffering much except from an overpowering weariness, which from time to time seemed entirely to overcome him. He never complained. Many of the English residents, knowing his position and the nature of his illness, came to see him or sent him frequent gifts of flowers or loans of books and papers. "So kind of everybody," he said several times, "so good of people to come and tire themselves by sitting with an invalid whom they really don't know. It is the fashion to call this a hard world, but there is a great deal of goodness in it; and if sometimes it is so latent that it seems not to be there, we may always comfort ourselves with the feeling that it is there, that it only needs some trifling incident to bring it out, to bring it all to the surface."

Then there came a few days in which the invalid was considerably worse; these in turn were followed by a few hours of semi-unconsciousness, and then—there was no Rector of Bladensbrook. Margot had no father. Mrs. Bladensbrook's old friend had passed.

CHAPTER XX.

MRS. BLADENSBROOK ASKS A PLAIN QUESTION.

IN all her life, Mrs. Bladensbrook had never been so much surprised as she was by Margot's manner during this time. She had expected in one so young a great outburst of grief when the knowledge of her great loss fell upon her. Those who have been watching during a long and anxious period the gradual dissolution of those nearest and dearest to them, those who have known for a long time that the end was certain and almost what the end would be, frequently—nay, generally—give way to great grief when the actual wrench comes; but with Margot nothing of the kind happened. When Mrs. Bladensbrook turned from the bedside and made as if to draw her away, saying, "We can do nothing more for him, dear. It is all over," Margot remained apparently perfectly unmoved. She was as white as death and looked worn out, but no tears came, no signs of grief showed themselves, and it seemed to the older woman's keen eyes as if her expression were one almost of relief. On the face of it that seemed impossible, and yet she could not shake off the impression that it was so. Jim, the elder of the two boys, who had arrived two days before from England, was standing looking down upon his dead father, his face convulsed, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Come, Margot, we can do nothing more," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. She was afraid that this unnatural calm would end in a terrible storm of grief; but as the hours wore on Margot did not give way at all, but stayed quiet and silent with that strange, crushed look in her young face which seemed out of place even in her sad circumstances. According to the Rector's wishes, expressed so plainly to Mrs. Bladensbrook, there was no thought or question of their taking all that was left of him home for burial. A grave was chosen in the sunniest part of the pretty cemetery, and Mrs. Bladensbrook gave orders that it should be lined with moss and studded with flowers. Most of the English people staying in the place attended the funeral, and many wreaths and beautiful blossoms were sent as a last tribute to one who had died so far from home. The will was in charge of an English solicitor staying for a couple of months in Pau, and he made the contents known to the son and daughter in a friendly and informal fashion.

"You see, Margot," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "your dear father left me your guardian. Of course, it will not be for very long; and I hope, dear, it will never be irksome to you. I am a very lonely woman, with a thick cloud of sorrow over my life; you have passed under a bitter experience, and that should be enough to draw us closer together than we have ever been. We will go home to Bladensbrook and make all necessary arrangements. There is so much to be done."

"What is there to do?" asked Margot.

"Well, dear, in the first place, the living must be filled up within a certain time or else my right to make a presentation lapses to the bishop. Then we must arrange what to do with all the things at the Rectory."

"But I thought Father said they were all to be sold," said Margot.

"Well, dear, there are some things which you and the boys will naturally wish to keep—portraits and silver and such things would only be thrown away in a sale. Your father particularly leaves instructions that personal things are to be divided between you and the boys as you may agree among yourselves. Anything that you wish to keep you can do so; it is merely the residue that he directs to be sold. Of course, it would be too dreadful to think that your mother's portrait should be put up to auction, and there are many other things almost of equal value."

"Oh, yes, I know that. One wouldn't like any of Mother's china to be thrown away, she was so fond of it. I don't know that either I or the boys care for it as she did, or ever will do so, because Mother was quite an expert in old china, and knew by the mere feel of a thing where it had come from and how old it was—I mean what pottery it had come from."

"Yes, yes, dear, your mother was an excellent judge of china. I always consulted her when I bought anything of importance. I am thinking of offering the living to Mr. Morris. I like him and Godfrey likes him very much; also he worked well

with your father, and he is very popular with the people, so that I don't think that I could make a wiser choice or one less calculated to hurt you young people in any way."

"Oh, we would rather have him than any one," said Margot, brightening up a little; "isn't that so, Jim?"

"Yes, certainly, Mrs. Bladensbrook. Morris is a good fellow, and Father thought no end of him. It must hurt when those who are appointed make it their first duty to upset every institution in the parish. You remember, Margot, when Greenhaugh died. He was rather inclined to be High Church, and the new man was a perfect iconoclast and tore down everything. Really, it seemed to those looking on as if he had done it because it was there a memento of his predecessor. I am quite sure that Father himself would have said, 'Give it to Morris,' if you had asked him who was to follow him."

"Then that decides me," said Mrs. Bladensbrook; "that also will make it very much easier when we go back again. There will be many things that he will be glad to take over from you, being a bachelor and living already in the house. The best thing we can do is to give him the choice of taking the entire furniture at a valuation after you three have taken away the things that you wish to keep for yourselves. I shall write to him at once about it."

"Then when shall we go back?" asked Jim.

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "it depends partly upon how long your leave lasts."

"Oh, I have got a fortnight's leave, and can get an extension for a few days, if necessary."

"Well, supposing that we go back on Tuesday? That would give you a few days at Bladensbrook. The best thing to do will be to take all the silver, all the china, and all the pictures of interest and any pieces of furniture that you fancy and pack them all safely at the House. Then, when Jack comes home, you can amicably settle which of you will take which. It would be a great thing to get the whole business over and done with as soon as possible, and, as you and I are the executors, it can be done quite easily, without any fuss or disagreement."

"There will be no disagreement," said Jim.

"No, my dear; I don't mean to imply that there can be; but under some circumstances, of course, such a business might be exceedingly disagreeable. I suppose, Margot," she went on, "that your mother's jewellery was put away?"

"Oh, Father gave me all the jewellery," said Margot; "and he always said that the boys were to have all the silver, because he wanted me to have mother's jewellery."

"I see. Then that makes it still more easy, Jim. Shall we so decide?"

"Certainly. Just as you like."

"I do think it would be the best."

"You are going to drive this afternoon?" asked Margot.

"Yes, dear, we may as well."

"Then I will go and get ready."

She left the room and for a minute or two neither Mrs. Bladensbrook nor Jim spoke. At last Jim got up and went to the window, where he stood with his hands in his pockets looking out into the sunlight. "Mrs. Bladensbrook?" he said, at last.

"Yes, Jim."

"Do you think Margot looks all right?"

"No, my dear boy, I think she looks all wrong," was her prompt reply. "Of course, one expects her to be terribly upset by our loss."

"But she is so unlike what I should have expected her to be. Have you noticed it?"

"I am very uneasy about her," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "But perhaps, when she gets home and away from the place where she has been alone with her anxiety, she will feel different about it. If not, I must take her away somewhere else. Poor little girl, I am so sorry for her. It seems so sad, when they were so happy together, that he should have been taken like this."

"You don't mind being left Margot's guardian, do you?" Jim asked, after a moment's pause.

"Oh, my dear boy, your father consulted me about it. I would have done anything to give him a little ease of mind; and I am very fond of Margot; she has always been a great favourite of mine. And, now that I am so lonely—not knowing where Godfrey is or what has become of him or whether I shall ever see him again—it will be a perfect God-send to me to have this young companion, I was going to say this gay young thing, about me, but there is little gaiety about the poor child now.

Still, as she gets over this she will be more as she used to be. It is early days for her to have forgotten or to have even tried to take up the ordinary threads of life again."

In truth, Margot was a very great puzzle both to Mrs. Bladensbrook and Jim. In manner and expression she was utterly changed. She seemed to be wrapped up in an impenetrable shroud of cogitation, her thoughts always seemed to be far away. She talked a little as they drove that afternoon, very quietly and collectedly, but seemed to take little or no interest in the scenery, and had never a smile on her face.

"You will be glad to get home to Bladensbrook," said Mrs. Bladensbrook to her that evening as they sat together after dinner.

Margot turned a pair of startled eyes upon her. "To go home?" she repeated. "No, I don't think I shall be glad to go home at all. I wish that I were never going home again."

"But, my dear child, I know exactly what you mean. It will be painful, very painful, going home to what will practically be an empty house; but it will soon be over, and the sooner it is done the less you will feel it."

"I was not thinking of that," said Margot.

"Then of what were you thinking, dear? Of the future? You know you and I will be very happy together, and by and by perhaps you will—marry, who knows."

"Oh, no," cried Margot; "you don't understand. I—I—shall never do that. Of course, it

is very kind of you to let me be with you and to live with you, and—I—I—only hope that you may never repent it, but I am afraid you may."

"Repent having you to live with me, Margot! Oh, nonsense!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, very kindly. "It is entirely my gain. I am delighted that your father chose me to be your guardian. I have always longed for a daughter, and, as I have not one of my own, you will be just the same to me. I daresay," Mrs. Bladensbrook went on, "that your Aunt Marcia will want you to pay her a long visit. Would you care for that?"

"I would rather die," said Margot. "Aunt Marcia is tiresome enough at ordinary times. I could not bear to be with her now. I—I—should go mad, I think."

"My poor child, you shall not do that; nobody can force you to go; my consent is necessary for anything that you would require to do, and I should certainly not allow you to go anywhere where you would be unhappy. I only say that she would expect it, and, of course, it is no use quarrelling with your aunt for nothing, and, of course, there are considerations that make it better that you should keep in with her."

"I would rather not go to Aunt Marcia's at present," said Margot. "I couldn't bear it."

"Then you shall stay at Bladensbrook with me," said the lady in a tone that evidently decided the question for her, but Margot's spirits did not rise at all.

The days went by and with each one that came

she seemed to be more wrapped up in her own thoughts and to look more strained and anxious.

"You know you are looking very ill, Margot," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, abruptly, to her on the day before they were to start for home.

Margot flushed a vivid scarlet. "I—I—am not very well," she stammered.

"My dear, you are very far from well. I think I have never seen anyone whose looks changed so much. You are not like the same girl."

"I am not the same girl," said Margot.

"But, my dear, it is not right that you should grieve for your father in this way. He was quite willing to go, and he would have suffered more and more had he lived longer. It is no use grieving and fretting for those that have left us, however dear they may have been; however dear they may be to us still. It is better to resign ourselves to the will of Heaven. I am sure your father would be the very first to say so if he were here now."

Margot opened her mouth as if to speak, but shut it again without saying a word. In truth, a denial of Mrs. Bladensbrook's words had risen to her lips, and she had almost blurted out that she was not grieving after or fretting for her father; that much as she had loved him and empty as life seemed to her then without him, yet her chief feeling at the time of his death had been one of intensest relief.

Mrs. Bladensbrook went on. "And you know, dear, I don't want to compare my trouble with yours in any way; but you should remember that

you know the worst. You know that your father is at peace, at rest forever, while I go on day after day, week after week, month after month, in absolute ignorance of whether my boy is alive or dead. Think if you were in my case."

"I do," said Margot. Of a truth she was so exactly in the same situation as her guardian that it seemed almost ludicrous to her to have stress laid upon the difference between their feelings, between what Mrs. Bladensbrook knew of her own and imagined Margot's to be. "I am not repining after Father at all," said Margot, presently. "Dear Daddy, he was so good, so kind, so true and loyal, and he made so much of us all. It will be dreadful going back to see the Rectory without him—however nice Mr. Morris is, he is not Daddy. To think of going back to the Rectory to root everything out from its place, to break up what has been our home ever since we can remember, is abhorrent and dreadful, to me, at all events, and I believe to poor old Jim also."

"My dear, it will be a dreadful wrench, but the sooner it is over the sooner you will put it back in the past, and I hope think about it no more. After all, it will be better if Mr. Morris decides to take over the furniture from you; it will be better to think that he, who loved your father, who worked with him so well, is to use all the familiar things rather than that they are scattered to the four winds of Heaven, a bit here, a piece there, so that they can never be gathered together again."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Margot. "Of course

he will have the living, and equally, of course, he will be glad to take the furniture, but I dread going back to Bladensbrook—oh, so much, you don't know."

"I know, dear child, I can see it in your sad little face. Margot, you are strangely altered."

"Oh, don't tell me that again," said Margot. "I know that I am altered, I know it so well. I am altered. I am not the same girl I was. I feel sometimes as if I would like to go away and lose myself."

Her words and the manner of uttering them caused Mrs. Bladensbrook to look at her still more keenly. Margot, unable to bear the close scrutiny, jumped up from her chair and went over to one of the windows where she stood half turned away, looking out. There was a long silence, such a silence as comes but seldom into our lives, a silence which can actually be felt, then Mrs. Bladensbrook put down her magazine and went across the room to where the girl was standing. "Margot," she said, laying her hand upon her shoulder and speaking in quite a different tone, "what are you brooding over?"

"Brooding?" said Margot, turning scarlet.

"Yes, my child, brooding. You have something on your mind, something that is not connected with your father's death. What is it?"

"Oh, what should make you think that?" asked Margot, nervously.

"Your strange manner, your more than strange words, and the evidence of my own eyes," said

Mrs. Bladensbrook, very quietly. "Margot, my dear child, daughter of my old friend, I am afraid that somebody has deceived you."

Margot's shoulder shrank a little under the touch of the kind, firm hand. She kept her face averted, but Mrs. Bladensbrook could see that the outline of the cheek—not so round as it once was—was flaming crimson. "I—I—am not quite what you think me," said Margot, painfully, after a long silence.

Mrs. Bladensbrook's mind went back swiftly over the immediate past, back to the moment of the Rector's death, when Jim had stood by the bedside with the tears chasing one another swiftly down his cheeks, and Margot's expression had been one of intensest relief. It had puzzled her at the time, now she clearly understood. It was relief that her father had died without learning the truth. "Have you nothing to tell me?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, at last.

"No—nothing," said Margot.

"Don't you mean to confide in me?"

"I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because I am under a solemn promise to betray nothing."

"But, my dear child, this cannot go on; this cannot be hidden; this is bound to come out—and before long. What are you thinking of doing?"

"I don't know," said Margot. "I am trusting to time and chance."

"It is no use trusting to time and chance in such

circumstances. You must act, you must think, we must plan. This must be kept."

"If it can be kept," said the girl.

"It will not be easy; but it must be done. My God! To think how near your father came to knowing everything. It would have broken his heart."

"No," said Margot; "because he would have understood."

"Margot," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "I am your guardian. I am your only friend; I am the only person in the world that you can safely confide in. I was your dead father's friend; your dead mother's friend likewise; there is one question which I must ask you and which you must answer—Who deceived you?"

CHAPTER XXI.

GOING HOME.

WHEN Mrs. Bladensbrook put that direct question to Margot, the girl moved away for the first time from the kindly sheltering hand lying upon her shoulder. "Who deceived you?" she asked.

"I cannot tell you," answered Margot.

"My dear, you cannot keep it a secret."

"I not only can, but I will. Mrs. Bladensbrook," she said, and then she turned round and flung herself upon her knees at the older woman's feet, clasping her gown on either side and looking up with her white, pinched face full of piteous entreaty

mingled with firmness, "Mrs. Bladensbrook, you have known me all my life; you know that I am not a bad girl; you know that I am not the kind of girl who would do an unforgivable thing; will you grant me one favour? I know it is the very hardest, the most difficult, the most impossible that I can ask you, but will you trust me? Some day I shall be able to satisfy you absolutely that I have done no wrong. I cannot answer your question. Will you promise me that you will stand by me—in—the time coming, that you will help me to keep this back from my brothers until such time as they and everybody else may know the whole truth? Will you trust me so far that you will ask me no question, that you will try to find out nothing? Oh, Mrs. Bladensbrook, I can't tell you what a load you will take off my mind if you will only do that for me. It is so much to me, it would be so little to you."

"But why can you not tell me?" Mrs. Bladensbrook asked.

"Because I have given my word that until a certain time has passed I will confide in nobody, tell nobody, bear anything that comes. If you won't help me, what can I do? Where can I go? I am your prisoner. I have no refuge but—death."

"My dear child, don't talk such nonsense," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, almost sternly "What has a young thing like you to do with death, excepting when it comes in your way as it did the other day? Don't talk in that wild way; I cannot bear to hear you."

"But you will do what I ask?" cried Margot, still pleading upon her knees.

"Shall I be doing right?" replied the older woman.

"Oh, yes; I swear to you, yes. Don't you think I would tell you if I were free to do so? Don't you think that after keeping it all these months, after having to confide in nobody, to tell nobody, to consult nobody, to ask nobody to help to bear the burden with me, don't you think that gladly would I tell you every detail, everything? Oh, yes, a thousand times yes. But I have given my word to one whom I trust now and for eternity. It may be that I shall never be free; it may be that I shall have to bear this burden to my grave; but there is a reason, there is a good reason, and I will bear it, if need be, to the very end."

"But, my dear child," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, trying to raise her from the ground, "would it not be better to tell me?"

"I cannot tell you. I have no leave to tell you; nay, more than that, I must beg, pray, implore you not to find out anything, not to ask me any more; but I give you my word of honour that it is not as you think."

"That means that you are married?"

"Yes," said Margot; "it means that I am married."

"In church?"

"Yes, in church, safely married, legally married. There is no doubt about it. He would rather have died than have played me false."

"If you think so, my child, why are you bound like this?"

"I cannot tell you. I can tell you nothing more; I only ask, as the one great favour that you can do me, that you will not seek to find when or by whom I was married."

"You were married in England?"

"Yes, in England. But you won't find out; you won't try, will you? You will let me keep my bitter secret until the proper time comes?"

"Yes, I will do that for you. My mind misgives me, Margot. I don't understand it. Girls did not do these things when I was young—at least, not the girls that I knew. I am sorry that you married without your father's knowledge somebody who was not bold enough and brave enough to go to your father and honestly ask for you for his wife."

"It was not for that reason," said Margot; "it was not, indeed. It was for something quite different. Some day I shall be able to explain everything, everything that now seems so impossible, so dishonourable, so unnecessary, and then you will say that I was not wrong, even if I was not right."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "that the ideas of right and wrong of to-day are different from what those ideas were in my time. But, my poor child, I will not reproach you. I will do what you ask; I will help you to keep this dreadful secret. How shall we best manage it? Let me see: we must go home to-morrow as we originally in-

tended, nothing can be done there without us, and time presses. We must stay a few days; you must keep as quiet and as much out of sight as you can. There is nothing to be gained by letting your world know what has happened. I will make arrangements to leave home, and I will take you away. I might take you to Switzerland. I don't think people from Bladensbrook often go to Switzerland. I never knew one."

"Oh, how good you are!" cried Margot, "how good you are! What should I have done without you?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "You would have done very badly. It's no use mincing matters; it's no use trying to smooth things down between ourselves; you and I have got a difficult task in front of us, a very difficult task, and we shall have to play our cards very, very carefully. I don't know that I am altogether right, and yet it cannot be wrong to hide the knowledge of such a situation from the world. It can do no good for people to know it. Yes, we will go to Switzerland, that will be the best place. We can go to some little village up in the mountains and keep pretty well out of the road of every one. Jim will not be able to come out, and Jack will not be back until everything is safe. I will get a fresh maid. I will leave Perkins at home with a special mission to do certain work for me. I will have a fresh maid, who will know nothing of our circumstances or who you are. If this matter is to be kept dark it can only be kept through your own circumspect

behaviour. Remember, you are going home among your own people who have not seen you for many months ; you will have to be very careful in every way."

"I will do anything," said Margot. "I will give my very life to make up to you for this. Oh, how good you are! And to think that I was once afraid of you."

"Afraid of me!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, in a tone of intense astonishment. "But why?"

"I don't know," said Margot. "Because you were Mrs. Bladensbrook, I think ; but until now I have always regarded you with awe, thought of you with nervousness ; I have always been a little afraid of you."

"My dear child, there was never any woman of whom you had less need to be afraid than I. However, for the present, don't let us speak of this again. Let us go home, get through all our business, get rid of that dear boy, Jim, and make our arrangements for leaving Bladensbrook, before we speak on the subject again. I don't intend to watch you ; that would betray you at once. I only urge you now for the last time to remember that it depends entirely upon your own demeanour whether the truth comes out now or not. It is time we went for our last drive here. Jim has gone off by himself ; do you and I get ready and go ; and remember that we do not speak upon the subject again until we are back in London after our visit home."

It seemed to Mrs. Bladensbrook, during the few days that followed, as if she must have been some-

thing more than blind not to have seen the change in Margot as soon as she arrived in Pau. It seemed to her that everybody who saw the girl must notice the terrible difference in her. She looked with a curious astonishment at Jim and at all the people in the hotel as they talked that last evening, wondering how in the world it had happened that there was no suspicion of the truth; then she remembered that she, who had known Margot from her babyhood, had noticed nothing, had only fancied her ill and fretting for her father. Surely, if she could be deceived, she who knew her so well, those who were comparative strangers to her would hardly be likely to notice anything. As for Jim, of course it was proverbial that boys never noticed their sisters' looks, so why should Jim any more than any other brother?

At last they had left Pau behind them and were well on their journey towards home. It was tiresome and tedious, but the worst journey comes to an end in time, and at last they drove up to the great entrance and it was over. The new Rector was waiting to bid them welcome. He met Mrs. Bladensbrook with the warmth of an intimate and devoted friend, shook hands with Jim with that peculiar air of sympathy which men show to one another in times of great affliction; and then he went and took Margot's two little hands, holding them in his own and looking down upon her without a single word of greeting for her. Mrs. Bladensbrook's heart stood positively still at the sight of it, for this was a contingency of which she had

never thought, for which she had never in her own mind provided. Of course, he was in love with Margot; for Margot's sake he had remained on doing curate's work in the little country parish, this brilliant man with his exceptional powers of organization, his great gift of eloquence, and his striking personality; it was for Margot's sake that he had accepted the living at Bladensbrook, and it was all no good, all for nothing—no use. She could not even warn him by so much as a hint that it was no use, and Mrs. Bladensbrook's brain positively reeled at the thought of the complications which were fast setting in upon her. Oddly enough a quotation came into her mind in that moment of meeting, "Oh, that a man might know the end of this day's business ere it comes." What would be the end of *this* business? She greatly feared shame and tribulation for Margot, pain and humiliation for the new Rector, that is to say, the Rector that was to be.

"It was kind of you to come up to welcome us home," she said, feeling that she must say something, however common-place, however trivial. "It is a sad home-coming for us all, and we have still sadder work before us. You will stay and dine, Mr. Morris?"

"I should be most happy to do so," he replied, turning his eyes reluctantly from Margot.

"That is good. Margot, the blue room, dear, next to mine."

"Thank you; I will go now and take my things off," said Margot.

They had stayed a night in London on their journey home, and Margot had bought, among other things, a tea-gown, all black, of deepest mourning fashion, which swathed her like a cloud of night. The new Rector positively jumped when she came down into the little drawing-room again. She looked so like a child swathed in those crape folds; she looked so young, so ill, so helpless; he longed to take her bodily in his strong arms and bid her confide in him all the grief and trouble that he could see was eating her very heart out. He, as Mrs. Bladensbrook had been, was quite mistaken in Margot. He believed that she was pining after her dead father, that she was fretting herself to a shadow, when in truth the burden on her mind was of so different a kind. "You know," he said, when he found himself alone with her, "that Mrs. Bladensbrook has offered me the living."

"Yes, I knew it," said Margot. "I am so glad. Daddy would have loved you to have it. I know he would; he was very fond of you, Mr. Morris."

"I believe he was, and I of him. Would that he were still in his old place. But you may rest assured that I shall make no changes excepting those that I feel he would have approved."

"Father always approved your changes," said she.

"I know. He was very good. I have thought of you so often, so much, and everybody here was so full of sympathy for you. The church was full when we had the service in his memory, as full as

when the bishop preaches. Everybody brought flowers, the altar was hidden by them. I know the Rector himself would have loved to see how much affection was shown for him."

"People are very good," said Margot; "and you are more than good, because they knew Daddy years and years and years ago, before I was born, but you have only known us a little while"

Before he could say anything, Jim Dangerfield came in and joined them. His entrance, of course, put to flight anything that the new Rector might have had in his mind to say. Later on in the evening, when Mr. Morris had gone back to the Rectory and Margot had gone to bed, Jim said uneasily to Mrs. Bladensbrook, "I feel sure that Margot is feeling this more than she will own to."

"Oh, yes, my dear boy, the poor child is holding up wonderfully; but she is very much broken. Don't take any notice at all of her manner or notice her appearance. She is ill and fretting and best left to herself. I think if she doesn't pick up within a day or two I shall take her up to town again and consult Sir Fergus Tiffany. There is nobody quite like him. I have the most implicit confidence in his judgment. I think that I shall take her to Switzerland for a time."

"That would be very kind of you. Poor little girl, you see she has always had some one to lean on before, and to be there alone. I have felt all along that Margot has borne more than her share."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "you may leave Margot implicitly to me. I will do the

best for her as I would for a girl of my own, and I always longed for a daughter—always, so you may rest quite tranquil about Margot. I daresay she will feel greatly better when we have got through the exceedingly unpleasant business of deciding what is to be kept and what is to be sold of the things at the Rectory.”

“Did Morris say anything about it to-night?”

“Yes; he says he will take over exactly what we leave; so we shall have no trouble beyond the mere going through the rooms and choosing such things as will have to be spared. The silver, you know, is here already.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Each winter that your father spent away I have had the silver in my strong room, so we need not trouble to go over that, as you would not be dividing that until one of you was married, or at least until Jack comes back again. Really, the other things will soon be settled; but,” she added, “I shall be glad when it is all comfortably over.”

CHAPTER XXII.

COMING AND GOING.

DURING the next few days there was much coming and going between the Rectory and the House. The day after their return home, Mrs. Bladensbrook with Margot and Jim Dangerfield went down

soon after breakfast and spent some hours at the old home which was now to pass away from them.

"I think we may save all the china, Margot?"

"Oh, yes, I should like to keep the china," said Margot, "very much."

"The silver, you know," Mrs. Bladensbrook went on to the new Rector, "is all at the House, so that we need not trouble about that. Then there are the pictures; what about the pictures, dear?"

The brother and sister went together round the lower rooms picking out the different pictures that they particularly wished to have preserved. Then Margot reminded Jim that a certain cabinet in the hall belonged to him. "You know Aunt George left it to you. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, of course. By Jove! I had forgotten it," said Jim. "I ought to stick to that, I think."

"Mark it down," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"And there is that model of the man-of-war that belongs to Jack. I believe he would be very much upset if we let that go. And you don't want it?" said Margot, turning to the new Rector.

"I am at your disposal," said he.

"Then there are all Father's books," Margot went on. "I don't think we want many of the books, Jim. What do you think? There were all his sermons and a great many lectures."

"And a great many manuscripts," said Mr. Morris, indicating the closets underneath the bookshelves in the Rector's study.

"I should like to keep the manuscripts," said Margot. "Father never finished his book. I

wonder if they will be of any use to anybody? It was the work of his life, and he—left it.”

“Well, dear, these things are in other hands than ours,” said Mrs. Bladensbrook, who did not want to go into a disquisition on the dead and gone Rector’s life-work just at that time, she being in great dread of the girl’s nerves breaking down.

“All his sermons. Wouldn’t you like to have them?” said Margot, looking at the Rector. “I don’t mean to *buy* them. We couldn’t sell Father’s sermons; but you might like to have them. I shouldn’t like to see them burned.”

“I should be delighted to have them, Miss Dangerfield,” said Mr. Morris, very gravely, “Anything of your father’s that you like to leave for me I will take care of with the greatest pleasure.”

“Thank you so much, so much. I want to get out of this room,” she said, turning round to Jim. “I cannot bear being here. There is the chair and the desk that Father used to sit at. Dear Daddy! I—I—cannot bear it. Could you not finish this without me?”

She did not wait for a reply, but turned and went quickly out of the room, across the hall and into the quaint, old-fashioned drawing-room with its beautiful Chippendale furniture and wealth of old china. “Mother loved old furniture; she was so fond of Chippendale,” her sad thoughts ran as she looked round the long, low room. “Oh, you are there, Mrs. Bladensbrook. I suppose it wouldn’t do to take this furniture? My Mother loved it.”

“My dear, she well might. It is very beautiful.

If you would like to have it, you have only to say so."

"It seems rather hard to come and take the best of everything away, doesn't it?"

"My dear child, it is to be sold. It would be much harder to make you sell what you wish to keep."

"Yes, yes, that is so. And that set of miniatures on the screen, I would not like to part with those.' Margot went on, looking round with sad eyes. "And Mother worked the fire-screen herself. I remember her doing it so well. And there's that little table with all the bits of silver on it. I think we ought to keep that, don't you? I don't think we need think about these chairs and tables. It is only the Chippendale things that I am really very keen on keeping. I don't care about the others. What do you say, Jim?"

Jim, who had just come into the room, agreed with Margot. In truth, he himself would have let everything go,—plate, pictures, china, and all. Boys are like that: it is women who cling to the home; it is women who make themselves nests; women who keep sentiment alive. So they went through the entire house until they came at length to Margot's own bedroom. "I don't want anything from here," she said, "excepting what Nancy knows about, nothing else. I want those pictures and just my own things. Nancy knows, don't you, Nancy?"

"Why, yes, Miss Margot, of course I do. I can remember which birthday everything came on,

which was from the dear master and from the dear mistress, so of course I do."

"Yes, Nancy knows. I am sure we needn't go over all this. Good-bye, little bedroom," she said in an undertone, as she passed out of the long corridor.

"Miss Margot," said Nancy, "there's a letter for you down-stairs. It came this morning."

"Oh, is there? Where is it?"

"I left it in my workroom. I left it there intending to bring it up to you myself at the House."

"I will come, Nancy." She followed Nancy down the corridor towards her own workroom. Mrs. Bladensbrook went the same way, not intending to follow the girl, but simply because that was the way that led towards the stairs.

"Here it is, Miss Margot," said Nancy, emerging from her room with the letter in her hand.

"Oh, thank you, Nancy. Thank you." She had caught sight in a moment of the superscription on the envelope, and she saw that it was in the half-disguised writing in which Godfrey had written to her once before. She took it with a shaking hand, her heart palpitating, her throat bursting, and every drop of colour fled from her never very rosy cheeks.

"I wanted to ask you a question, Miss Margot," said Nancy, "and now that Madam is here it is a good opportunity for me to ask it. Do you wish me to stay with you? Mr. Morris has asked me to remain just as I have always been, and I told him I should be very pleased, if so be that you didn't

require me. If you want me, there is not another situation in the world I would say thank you for."

Margot looked piteously at Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Well, really, I hardly know what to say, Nancy. You have been so long with Miss Dangerfield."

"Yes, a long time," said Nancy, closing her mouth very tightly.

"Mrs. Bladensbrook," said Margot, in an undertone, "let us talk it over before we decide. Anyhow, Nancy might come up and see me to-morrow afternoon—may she?"

"My dear, when you like to arrange for her coming."

"To-morrow afternoon about between four and five, and then we will talk over what I am going to do. I must discuss it all with Mrs. Bladensbrook first. You dear Nancy!" she exclaimed impulsively, suddenly catching the old servant round the shoulders and kissing her on either cheek. "There will never be anybody like you to me, never—never!"

The quick tears came into Nancy's hard eyes, and she caught her nursling in a grip that was almost convulsive. "My precious lamb! I can't bear to see you with the shadows on your face as they are——"

"No, Nancy, no; don't say the thing. Don't break me down here. It is so bad for the new Rector. It makes him feel that we grudge him the place."

"I think the new Rector understands, Miss Margot, exactly what you and me is feeling," said the

old servant, holding the girl's hand fast and looking at her with yearning eyes. "I think the new Rector is more sorry for all of us than words can say. He was rare and put out when the poor master was took; aye, I didn't think that anybody who had known him so short a time could have felt it so deeply."

"Don't, Nancy," said Margot, "please don't!"

"Come, my dear, you and Nancy will get over this by and by, at present you upset each other. It is quite natural, Nancy. I appreciate your devotion to the dear Rector very highly, but Miss Margot is not very strong yet; she has gone through a great deal, and you shall come up to-morrow afternoon and we will talk over all the future."

"Thank you, Madam, thank you," said Nancy, dropping a curtsey. She dabbed away a few tears viciously and as if she were ashamed of them, then with a hurried kiss on her nursling's cheek she turned and fled away down the corridor.

"I knew Nancy would upset me," said Margot.

"No, my dear, she will do nothing of the kind. You must learn not to be upset by one so kind. Pull yourself together. Let us go down and finish what is to be done."

"Mrs. Bladensbrook, I cannot do any more. I am utterly knocked over for to-day. I wish you would take me home."

"My dear child, of course I will take you home if you feel like that. You have only to speak. I will order the carriage at once. My dear Mr. Morris," she said, as they reached the hall again,

"this child is tired out: she is not very strong yet. Now you will let us go to-day and come back again to-morrow and finish everything. Shall we see you up at the House to-day?"

"I think not to-day," said he, half hesitatingly.

"Won't you dine with us?"

"You are very kind."

"Does that mean yes?"

"I hardly like to say so; but yet—I don't like saying no."

"Then it is settled that you come, and we will expect you. Now come, Margot, don't look round any more, dear; not even at your own especial things. Come, dear, let us go."

But even then Margot had no chance of reading her precious letter, not even at taking a peep at the outer cover that she might glean something of its inward sweetness. Still, all excitement and anxiety as she was, hedged round in every way as she was at that moment, she had the glorious satisfaction of knowing that Godfrey was at least alive; he had written to her with his own hand, and she felt stronger and better able to bear her fate than she had done for months past.

They went straight into lunch, for they reached the house at the ordinary luncheon hour. Mrs. Bladensbrook sat some little time at table talking things over with Jim, and every now and again drawing Margot into the conversation, so that she had no excuse for slipping away to read her precious letter. Oh, how long it was! She kept putting her hand into her pocket and fingering it

feeling it, as if by so doing she would extract some information from it, but from this occupation she extracted nothing except a certain satisfaction that it had come straight to her from Godfrey.

"I can't think," Jim was saying, "where you will put all these things."

"My dear boy, have you never seen the up-stairs rooms? We have some twenty rooms at the top that have nothing in them and are never used. You see, this house is so large and we don't have large house-parties, so the attics have never been furnished, and so anything that is up there will be looked after and taken care of. Pray put that idea out of your head. I am only too glad to do such a trifle for either of you."

"That is awfully good of you," said Jim, gratefully. "By the bye, Margot, do you remember a curious little picture, a sort of old oil-painting done on a panel?"

"Do you mean the strawberry man?" asked Margot.

"Yes, the strawberry man," said Jim.

"Oh, yes, that? Father got it into his head that it was a valuable picture and sent it to be cleaned or something in London. I think we shall find a memorandum of it somewhere."

"I don't remember such a picture," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Oh, yes, surely you must. You remember the little ante-room between the drawing-room and the dining-room? That little place that Mother used to call the corner room?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was in that. Just by the drawing-room door, a very curious old panel, a picture of a man with a strawberry mark on his face. Now, don't you remember?"

"My dear, so I do. True. Why, I haven't seen it, I was going to say, for years."

"No, I don't suppose you have seen it for years. It is quite a year since Father took it into his head that it was a valuable painting. I know he sent it to London, and I believe he forgot to write about it."

"I must look out for some mention of it when I go over the papers with Margot," said Jim.

"Yes, that would be a good plan. You are going down to-morrow, are you not?"

"To-morrow morning. We think it is best that they should be gone through, and, of course, he wants the room. Besides, there are all sorts of letters and receipts and old bills and pamphlets and all sorts of things that are no use except for waste paper, so I am going to-morrow morning and we will get it turned out. You don't want to go down for that, Margot?"

"Oh, no, certainly not. I hate going."

"And I will tell you what there is, old girl; there is a splendid toboggan in the outhouse, I think. What about that?"

"Is that worth keeping?" asked Margot.

"No, I don't know that it is worth keeping."

"Well, then, my dear Jim, take it then. You have no objection to Jim taking that, have you, Mrs. Bladensbrook?"

"My dear, I have no objection to Jim's taking anything that he wishes to have; besides, it was yours, wasn't it, Jim?"

"Yes, it was mine and Jack's. Old Jack hasn't much use for a toboggan out on the high seas or on a foreign station."

"Oh, no; you have it," said Margot. "And if you don't want me any more, I would like to go and lie down. I have got such a headache."

"Do, dear child, lie down and go to sleep. I won't come near you till tea-time, and then I will let you know."

"Thank you so much." She went from the room a little unsteadily, opening and closing the door very softly, her fingers tightly clasping the precious letter from Godfrey.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PRECIOUS MISSIVE.

ONCE safe in the shelter of her own room, Margot was free to open the letter from Godfrey. She noticed first of all that the envelope was pink and very common, having a hideous embossed spray of flowers on the flap, which opened so as to allow the letter to be drawn out endways. She tore it open with trembling fingers and drew out the contents, not a sheet of pink paper to match the envelope, but a mere scrap of white paper of a thicker kind

just doubled in two. On it was written in pencil, without any attempt at disguise in the handwriting :

“MY OWN DARLING,—This is to tell you that I am yours still and forever. I am tolerably well, and must ask you to still keep my secret—our secret—as faithfully as you have done up to the present time. I think of you continually, and wonder if you still trust me as you promised to do. I know it is a very hard test of faith, but when I am able to tell you everything, you will see that I have acted in the only way that was possible to me. I wish that I could hear from you, but that is quite impossible. I would write to my mother if I could, but cannot do so. She will understand that I have a reason, and a good one. Dearest, I have lived on the memory of our few happy days together. I exist until we meet again. Your true and devoted Godfrey.”

She sat staring at the letter for a long time trying to make out what it could possibly mean. It was inexplicable to her that Godfrey should write on a soiled half-sheet of note-paper, using a common envelope, such as she was sure he had never seen in his life before ; that he should have any difficulty in writing, and that the postmark was London, each was inexplicable. Where could he be ? Why was he hiding, keeping out of sight in this mysterious manner ? She had never heard that any of the Bladensbrooks had been affected in their minds ; but it seemed to her then as if Godfrey must have taken leave of his senses ; it seemed to her as if he must have gone entirely wrong in his head. Could he have been taken with any delusion and be hiding in some squalid part of London out of everybody's way for no earthly reason ? She read the letter again. The handwriting was firm, Godfrey's

own handwriting, although it is true it was in pencil; then she looked at the envelope; that was in pencil, too, and had been written over with ink. It was like and yet unlike Godfrey's handwriting. She could not make it out. She read it again and yet again with a sinking heart and a choking throbbing in her throat. He was still her "true and devoted Godfrey," but her mind misgave her whether he was still the same Godfrey that she had known during her whole life. At last she locked the letter away in her desk and laid down upon the couch, which was drawn up to the fire, and as she lay there among the silken cushions, wondering and conjecturing, puzzling and trying to piece the fragments of the communication together so as to evolve some tangible whole out of them, she fell asleep, and was sleeping when Mrs. Bladensbrook came to tell her that tea was ready.

"I am glad you have been asleep, Margot," she said, kindly. "I looked in to tell you, dear, that tea will be ready in five minutes. Do you feel inclined to come down?"

"Oh, yes, of course," answered Margot, "of course I will come down. I have been to sleep for a long, long time."

"Do you feel better?"

"I feel less tired," the girl replied. She washed her hands and touched her hair here and there before she descended to join Mrs. Bladensbrook and Jim in the little drawing-room.

"I cannot make you out, Margot," said Jim, sud-

denly, as she sat down not very far from the little table.

"Cannot make me out, Jim? Why?"

"I don't know. You look so much older. You have got such a queer, old-womanish sort of way about you. Why don't you walk into the room? Why do you creep like that?"

Margot went scarlet instantly. "I—I—didn't know that I did."

"Don't tease her, Jim," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"I had no intention of teasing her," said Jim, looking at her half contritely; "but I have been accustomed to a Margot that was bright and brisk. This Margot is neither bright nor brisk."

"Margot has been through a terrible time of trouble," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, somewhat indignantly.

"Yes, I know that. We have all been the same; but, although, goodness knows, I am as sorry that my father is dead as any man can be, it doesn't affect my way of walking into a room."

"Ah, Margot has sat up too long; she sat up with your father a great deal; she fagged herself out; her spine is very weak," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, decidedly. "After three or four months of Switzerland, she will be quite the Margot you like to see her and whom you have been accustomed to see."

"I am sure I hope so," said Jim, not in the least daunted from the position he had taken up. "I believe the best thing you can do, my dear child, is to come out on the tandem with me and have a

good spin for ten or twelve miles. It would do you all the good in the world ; you have got humped up and moped. Come out on the tandem with me."

Margot looked at Mrs. Bladensbrook. "I don't think," she said, "that a good spin on the tandem will help me at all just now."

"Ah, you coddle yourself too much. That's the worst of girls. You ought to get out into the open, into the fresh air ; walk, ride, strengthen yourself up. I do hope if you take her to Switzerland, Mrs. Bladensbrook, that you will make her walk every day."

"I shall be most strict with her," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, not looking at Margot ; "she shall do all sorts of things when she gets to Switzerland. The truth is, my dear Jim, that you don't understand, being only a young man, how very much your dear father's death and long illness have taken it out of Margot's vitality."

"Perhaps I don't," said Jim, in a contrite voice.

Mrs. Bladensbrook felt as if she had been guilty of telling a deliberate and down-right lie, for she knew perfectly well that it was not the Rector's illness and death which had so altered Margot from her old self. It would be hard to express how much Mrs. Bladensbrook pondered over the general situation from first to last. She had never seen the smallest signs of flirtation about Margot ; she had always regarded her as a little simple, innocent girl who might marry some day, but hardly as one who would ever have a lover. There are many girls who marry, who make model wives and

mothers, who never really live, who never understand the greater ecstasies of life, whose whole existence is passed in a kind of twilight so far as the greater passions are concerned. Somehow Mrs. Bladensbrook had always pictured Margot in her own mind as being one of these; and yet here was Margot in as awkward a position as any young girl could find herself in. She had taken her word that she really was married; she had trusted her, and meant to do so until such time as she could speak; but the whole thing was inexplicable to the lady of Bladensbrook, who had looked upon Margot Dangerfield as the very last person in the world to inspire or to experience anything approaching to a grand passion. Now, Mrs. Bladensbrook had, during the short time which had passed between her arrival at Pau and the death of Mr. Dangerfield, built up a very nice little romance in her own mind of which Margot was one of the principal figures. She had arranged everything in quite a cut and dried fashion that she should give the living to the curate in charge, that he would take over all the furniture, and he would marry Margot. Nothing could be better, no position could be more desirable to the girl than that which had been hers all her life. She knew everybody at Bladensbrook and everybody at Bladensbrook knew and liked her, she would make an ideal little Rector's wife; and the Rector to be would make an ideal husband for Margot. Unfortunately, Margot had put this little scheme outside the bounds of possibility forever; Margot had shown herself

capable of planning out her own life, not very successfully, it is true, so far, but still sufficiently so to make other people's plans of no value whatever. The first thing that Mrs. Bladensbrook noticed on her return from Pau was that a similar scheme had presented itself to the mind of the new Rector. She had perceived it with a kind of horror; she felt, having had such an idea herself, as if she were the cause of it; she felt guilty, and she felt something more than guilty in possessing the knowledge of the true state of affairs and yet in not being able to warn Mr. Morris that he had better put any such idea out of his mind without the delay of a single moment. That evening, for instance, she watched him with a sense of uneasy guilt, and she saw that he was attracted to a very dangerous extent by her young ward. He waited upon her, watching her every movement with an assiduity which made Mrs. Bladensbrook, who had only just discovered the true state of affairs for herself, wonder where the man's eyes could possibly be. And Margot, in her deep mourning attire, out of which her slender young throat and thin little hands seemed to come like snow-flakes, only served to heighten his admiration and to deepen Mrs. Bladensbrook's extreme uneasiness.

"Margot," she said, a little later, when the Rector had said good-night to them and Jim had gone to see him off, "you must be very careful what you are doing."

"I?" said Margot, looking up with startled eyes. "Why?"

"Because Mr. Morris is not a little attracted."

"By me?" said Margot.

"Yes, by you, Of course, it is the most natural thing in the world that he should be, the most natural thing in the world that he should be thinking of marrying, and that he should be thinking of marrying you."

Margot sat bolt upright. "I really don't know how he dare!"

"My dear, any man dare admire any woman. He has admired you for a long time."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"Why, I wouldn't marry him if——"

"My dear child," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, dryly, "you couldn't marry him however much you wanted to; so it is no use discussing that question; but as you cannot tell the man just now precisely why you are neither able nor willing to marry him, it would be the kindest to discourage him as much as you possibly could."

The result of this was that when the Rector came up to the House again Margot treated him with the most chilly and deadly indifference. Only a very young woman could have done it so openly and plainly as she did. At first the new Rector noticed nothing. He sat down beside her and began admiring a bit of many-coloured embroidery with which she was toying. "By the bye, Miss Dangerfield," he said, "Nancy has told me that she is perfectly sure there are some things that you have not remembered that you would wish to

keep. Could you not come down to the Rectory to see them?"

"No," said Margot, "I—I—could not."

"Oh, but would it not be better?"

"No, not at all. Nancy knows very well what I am likely to want, and if Nancy says I ought to keep them, I will keep them."

"But why shouldn't you come down and see them?"

"Because I don't want to come," said Margot, bluntly and looking half indignantly at him. "It is not pleasant to me to go home to the place that is no longer my own, Mr. Morris. I suffered dreadfully the other morning. I really could not come again."

"Margot," said he, dropping his voice, "there is one way in which you could come with every right."

"I don't know that way," said Margot.

"It is a very simple one."

"It is impossible and out of the question. I shall never come to the Rectory again. Please don't suggest it. Tell Nancy that what she thinks I would care to keep she will do right in sending up here with the other things." And then Mrs. Bladensbrook came into the room and the *tête-à-tête* was at an end, not a little to his chagrin, not a little to Margot's satisfaction.

"I suppose your brother goes back to his regiment soon?" said the Rector, when he had greeted Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Yes, he goes back to-morrow."

"And you go away?" he asked, turning to the lady of the house.

"We go on Monday—yes, Monday. We shall be away some months. I thought it better for many reasons that we should get a long change from the painful associations that Bladensbrook has for both of us. Of course, I shall be in continual communication with my people here, and if anything should require my presence I can come home at a moment's notice."

During these few days there were very few visitors at Bladensbrook. For months past Mrs. Bladensbrook had been living such a retired life and had shown so little disposition to confide her trouble to any of her neighbours, that they had by common consent come to leave her almost alone. She was not a woman who had inspired intimate friendships, indeed such had always bored her or would have done so if she had allowed them to come about. Nobody in the neighbourhood had been as intimate with her as Margot's father, and Margot had learned more of her ways and disposition during the past few months than she had done in all the years of her life.

How Margot puzzled about that letter! How often she took it out, read it, turned over the envelope, looked at the postmark, at the semi-disguised handwriting of the address, at the common little embossment on the flap. But they told her nothing, each and all only served to deepen the mystery by which Godfrey was surrounded.

On Saturday evening, Nancy, the old servant

who had been Margot's nurse, left the Rectory and took up her abode at the House. Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot had thoroughly discussed the question of what maid they should take with them. From the very first Mrs. Bladensbrook had declared against the idea of taking her own maid with them. "I can leave her behind in a position of trust which will thoroughly satisfy her soul," she said to Margot. "The only fault that Perkins has is that she talks. Now to me that has never mattered, because I have never had any page in my life which could not be talked about; but it would matter to us now. The question is would it be better to have a strange maid and keep her in the dark, or would it be better to take Nancy into our confidence and trust to her holding her tongue?"

"I think we had better tell Nancy," said Margot, "because she is very reticent. Father always used to say she was as close as wax, and she is very fond of me, anything that I tell her will be sufficient. I mean to say, she won't doubt my word, she is much too fond of me. It would be much more pleasant for me if Nancy knew, and we might leave her in—charge—of—you know what I mean—*afterwards*."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "of course there is that to be thought of, and Nancy is a very trustworthy person in every way. I almost think that the best thing to do would be to take a cottage somewhere on the south coast and put Nancy there with the child and another maid. I don't know what else can be done with it."

"I am sure that Nancy will be the best," said Margot; "but, oh, Mrs. Bladensbrook, if we were only out of this. You don't know how I dread people. I am so frightened of Mr. Morris."

"Why, dear?"

"Oh, I am so afraid of him. He suggested that I should go back to the Rectory yesterday."

"What? he proposed to you?"

"Well, he would have done if I didn't put him off; and I am afraid I was very rude, but I was so frightened."

"My dear child, this really is most awkward. You know, Margot, I am afraid you will find the inconvenience of the situation something terrible."

"I cannot help it," said Margot. "It is worse for me than for anybody else, and I do get so frightened when—when——"

"Yes, I understand," said the other, dryly. "I quite understand. You must try to make yourself less attractive, my dear child." For somehow Mrs. Bladensbrook had come to look upon Margot as a very attractive, dangerously attractive, person indeed, seeing that the Rector was evidently hopelessly in love with her, and so must have been the unknown who had won her heart.

CHAPTER XXIV.

RALPH.

MRS. BLADENSBROOK'S last instructions to her steward were to forward all letters immediately to her latest address, to retelegraph any telegrams, and to give her address to nobody. "I am going away for rest and change," she said to him, "and I don't want to be joined by any people I know; so if any one asks you where I am say that I am in Switzerland or in the Austrian Tyrol or wherever the district may be, but don't give the address; don't say what town or village I may be in. You may forward any letters to me, that is quite sufficient for anybody to know."

They left Bladensbrook attended only by Nancy, and if Mrs. Bladensbrook missed the attentions of her own maid she bore it cheerfully and uncomplainingly for Margot Dangerfield's sake. She did not hustle Margot straight off to Switzerland; oh, dear, no. She took her to London, then to Paris, then to Aix-le-Bains, where she herself took a course of the baths, and thence to Geneva, from which they were free to go to any out-of-the-way spot best suited to their purpose. From the time of leaving London, Margot had dropped her own name and had assumed that of Mrs. Trevor. This had been the outcome of much cogitation, of much going over pros and cons, whys and wherefores

for and against. "I am quite convinced," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "that it is best to keep this affair as dark as possible. You can go to the Consul and register the child in its proper name. I ask no questions; I have promised to trust you, and I will do so to the end, therefore everything will be quite legal and straight and above-board, but for ourselves, I feel that the best thing you can do is to have as little opportunity of identifying Mrs. Trevor with Miss Dangerfield as it is possible to have. For instance, if any of the people at home hear of this or get any inkling of it, they will make life exceedingly unpleasant for you. Heaven knows, I don't like lending myself to anything of the kind, but your father left you to me, and I must do the best I can for you. I only feel truly thankful that this affair all happened in your father's lifetime; that I am not in any way responsible for it."

So Margot began to be known as Mrs. Trevor as soon as she reached the other side of the channel, and Miss Dangerfield was discreetly dropped. It was wonderful how her health and spirits improved when once they had left England behind them. They were very fortunate in not coming across any of their acquaintances. Once they had a very narrow shave of coming face to face with Margot's aunt, Mrs. Blake. They happened to be in Lausanne, when Nancy came bolting up into their sitting-room, "Oh, M'm, Mrs. Bladensbrook, Madam, what are we to do? She is down-stairs!"

"Who is down-stairs?" asked Mrs. Bladens-

brook, standing up and looking very much astonished.

"Oh!" cried Nancy, holding her hand to her chest as if to still the tumultuous beating of her heart; "oh, Madam, you might have knocked me down with a feather!"

"Who *is* it, Nancy?" asked Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Oh, Madam—don't flurry me! I have had that turn I scarcely know whether I am standing on my head or my heels! Oh, Miss Margot—Oh, Madam—she is down-stairs! She is in this hotel. Lucky you didn't write your name in the books."

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Bladensbrook for the third time.

"Mrs. Blake!" said Nancy.

"Oh, Mrs. Bladensbrook!" cried Margot; "what in the world are we to do?"

"Do, my dear? We must pay for our rooms and for our dinner and go. Nancy, go down-stairs—stay, ring the bell, ring the bell, Nancy. Now I insist upon it that you don't get flurried, either of you. It merely requires a little careful handling to get out of this quite easily. Nancy, before the waiter comes go down-stairs, find out from the chambermaid where Mrs. Blake comes from; how long she is going to stay; if possible, where she is going."

"Yes, Madam."

"Oh, Garcon, I want you to get us our bill. I am afraid we shall not be able to remain. I will pay for our rooms and dinner. I know you have

a great many people coming, so that it will make no difference to you. It will be rather a convenience."

"As Madame chooses," said the waiter, politely.

"I feel that the air of this place does not suit me. I will pay for the rooms and dinner, and will go on by the train leaving about four o'clock. I will have a private carriage to the station."

When Nancy came back again she had discovered that Mrs. Blake had been staying for some days in the house; that she was intending to remain there for some little time longer, and was going thence to Geneva on her way home to England.

"And she did not see you?"

"No, Madam, she didn't see me at all. She has gone out for a drive and will not be back for two hours."

"And from whom did you get all this information?"

"Oh, I got it from her maid. Mrs. Blake's maid is in the servants' hall, and I entered into conversation with her quite naturally."

"But supposing she brings her maid to—— Oh, I forgot; she won't come to the Rectory any more. We are not likely to see her maid."

"I don't think I am likely to see her maid, Madam," said Nancy, "because she is only going with her as far as London; she doesn't particularly care for Mrs. Blake's service, and she gladly talked over her place with me and told me everything that I wanted to know."

"You think Mrs. Blake did not see you?"

"I am sure she did not, Madam," answered Nancy.

"Then we will go by the train that leaves at four o'clock. You had better go down to the bureau and find out exactly what time the train leaves. We can telegraph from the station to the Grand Hotel du Lac, and we must trust to getting rooms; but as it is so early in the year we shall be able to do that."

In a trice Nancy was hard at work packing up the things which she had but just taken out of their boxes, and at the appointed time Nancy, having gone down to see that the coast was clear, was followed by the two ladies, who slipped into the open carriage and put up their parasols so as to shade their faces as much as possible. They were fortunate in finding rooms reserved for them at the hotel, and they remained for a few days at Vevey ere they moved on into the less frequented districts. Finally, they came to a resting-place in a secluded valley within reach of an English doctor, but quite apart from the general stream of tourists and holiday makers. Here Mrs. Bladensbrook secured a suite of rooms in the best of the three modest hotels, and here they were joined by an English nurse sent out from a great institution in London.

"You will understand," said Mrs. Bladensbrook to her, "that I am particularly anxious that you should not talk about me at all. I shall make you a very handsome present on condition that you will never mention my name to a soul. It is better to take you into my confidence, because I don't

want you to think that we are doing anything in the least underhand; but the young lady whose confinement you are to attend is my ward. She is married; but her marriage cannot be divulged at present, and I am very anxious that she should not have the unpleasantness of this being known among her friends, so that we shall keep the whole affair out of sight until it is time for her husband to declare the marriage. Do we quite understand one another?"

"Oh, certainly, Madam, absolutely. I have attended similar cases. We nurses find it best to hold our tongues. Of course, in the case of anything connected with the law I should have no choice."

"There will be nothing connected with the law," said Mrs. Bladensbrook; "nothing whatever. If anybody asks you what you were doing in Switzerland, you can say quite frankly that you were attending a young English lady, a Mrs. Trevor. It is Mrs. Bladensbrook who wishes to be kept as much as possible in the background."

"Very good, Madam; I will not say a word to anybody. I will not mention your name."

Naturally, Margot had not many letters to receive; only those from her two brothers, which, for the sake of convenience, went to Bladensbrook and were forwarded under cover with Mrs. Bladensbrook's correspondence.

So in the modest hostel of a small Swiss town the little heir of the Bladensbrooks was born into the world; coming with no flourish of trumpets

and pomp and ceremony, as would have been the case had such a birth taken place openly at Bladensbrook, but ushered in by stealth, a nameless little waif who had come at an inconvenient time, and who was really not wanted; who was nothing but a trouble and a nuisance to those who would have been the most proud of him had he been born in the cradle of his race. However, in spite of the decided awkwardness of becoming possessed of a baby, it must be admitted that Margot was exceedingly happy in the society of this small atom of pink humanity. "Oh, Mrs. Bladensbrook," she cried, when she woke from her first sleep to find her guardian sitting by the window deeply engrossed in some intricate game of Patience, "isn't he delicious? Did you ever see such a dear little thing?"

Mrs. Bladensbrook got up, leaving her cards with what was almost a sigh, and came and stood beside the bed, looking down upon the downy head snoozling against Margot's bosom. "Well, my dear," she said, "I am very pleased that you are pleased with it; for my own part I may sound very unwomanly and very unfeminine, but I never could see very much in very young infants. They all seem to me just alike. Now, my dear, Godfrey was just such a baby as that."

Margot felt herself going a painful and an abject crimson. There was no possibility of hiding her face, though she did put up one little snow-flake of a hand to brush an imaginary something away from her forehead. "I think he is a dear," she

said, with an assumption of indignation which she did not in the least feel; "and you may decry him as much as ever you like, but I shall always think so just the same."

"Very right and proper, my dear child. I have no objection to your thinking all the world of the little creature," said the other with kindly good-nature. "His coming is a little inconvenient, and it is a great pity we could not arrange that he should stay where he was for another year or so; but as humanity has not yet been brought to that pitch of perfection, we must just make the best of it. It would be dreadful, indeed, for a child if his own mother had no welcome for him," and then she gave another sigh, thinking of the welcome she would give to her child if he should reappear at ever so inopportune a moment, and then she turned and went back to her game again leaving Margot free to fuss over the baby to her heart's content.

"By the bye," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, some three or four days later, "that child will have to be registered."

"What is that?" asked Margot.

"Well, you have to put a child down, to register it, to prove its identity, its nationality, its citizenship, and it will have to be baptized. Now, you have your reasons for not wishing to divulge the name of the father, but you must divulge it to the registrar, and you must have the child baptized in its own name."

Margot looked at her guardian with scared eyes. "What had I better do?" she asked.

"Well, my dear, I don't want to pry into your secret, goodness knows. I told you in the beginning that I would trust you and try to find out nothing. You had better let nurse go and register the birth. She will give you her word to say nothing about the name of the father, and being perfectly indifferent to your affairs it can be but a matter of business to her. As for the baptism, we had better have the child baptized here by the English clergyman, and you can give him the names and the information."

"If you don't mind," began Margot.

"Mind, my dear? I told you in the beginning that I would trust you. I wish all this necessity for secrecy had not arisen; and even now I cannot make up my mind whether it would not be better for you to go back to Bladensbrook as Mrs. Trevor. The only thing is it might set curious people searching the registers for your marriage, and that would be awkward for you."

"Mrs. Bladensbrook," said Margot, in an eager and trembling voice, "I have given my word to my husband that I will not divulge our secret until I see him again. The reason for this I cannot imagine. I have no idea why he asked me to do this—at least, I mean, that I, of course, know why he wished it, but I have no idea why he wishes it to last so long. I cannot help it if people choose to examine the registers; they will find my marriage there right enough. Indeed, I do think it would be better for me to go back to Bladensbrook as Mrs. Trevor, because, if I don't do that, if I go

back as Margot Dangerfield, I shall have to leave my baby behind me."

"Very well. Then we will break the news of the marriage to everybody concerned. They are not many. By the bye, what do you mean to call the baby?"

"I should like to call him Ralph," said Margot, nervously.

"Ralph?" Mrs. Bladensbrook's accents were of complete surprise. "How very strange."

"Yes, I think it would be a charming name."

"I am glad you are going to call your baby Ralph," said the older woman, very softly. "My husband was called so."

CHAPTER XXV.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR VISITOR.

By the help of the good nurse, the difficulty of registering the birth and of baptizing the infant were got comfortably and safely over. Before the baby was a month old, however, an imperative summons came for Mrs. Bladensbrook to go home. "My dear Margot," she said, when she had read the letter, which was practically one of recall, "there is no help for it. I must go to Bladensbrook at once."

"But why?"

"There is something wrong with those cottages

just beyond the stables. They have got typhoid among them, and very badly, too. The drainage seems to be all wrong, the drinking water seems to be wrong, the wells are poisoned. I must go at once. The question is what in the world I am to do with you? I cannot take you back there. In the first place, you could not take such a long journey; and in the second place, it is impossible for you or the child to go into any infected districts; and, in Godfrey's interests, it is necessary that I should be on the spot for a time to see that everything is done as if he were at home or as if I were still in full power. The best thing I can do is to leave you here with nurse and Nancy. I can say that I was afraid of your going into infection, and that I have left you with Nancy. Nancy, of course, is a sufficient guarantee of safety and respectability for any enquirer."

"Oh, yes, indeed, I do think that would be the best," said Margot.

"Not only that. I have been thinking, Margot, if we divulge this marriage—I mean to say if we divulge the fact that you are married and that you have got a baby—it will set your Aunt Marcia ferreting out things. I am sure it will be best to say nothing until we are driven to it."

So they arranged it, and Mrs. Bladensbrook went off to England by herself, leaving the strictest injunctions with Nancy and the nurse to take the utmost care of Mrs. Trevor until her return. When, however, Mrs. Bladensbrook set foot once more upon her own threshold, she found that her troubles

had begun in real earnest. She was greeted with the news that the typhoid had developed into a very dangerous form of typhus ; that, in spite of the care and attention she had given during the whole of her regency to the improvement of the estate, many cottages were condemned as being absolutely unsanitary, and a great deal of money would have to be spent in satisfying the requirements of the authorities in that respect. "My dear Sir," she said to the officer who first broke the news to her that the village of Bladensbrook was in a very bad condition, "in my son's absence I am perfectly willing to do anything in the world to prevent the recurrence of such an epidemic. You know you can see for yourself that our people are well cared for ; we have practically no workhouse in Bladensbrook, at least we do not contribute anything like our share to the workhouse of the district. Our people are satisfied, as they have been for generations—as I hope they will be for generations to come ; this terrible epidemic is a visitation. I can regard it as nothing else. Why it should have come is beyond me. Every one of those cottages was officially inspected less than two years ago, and they were declared then by your predecessor, or, perhaps, by one of his assistants, to be in perfect condition. We have not a roof that has a tile wrong, unless it has got wrong since I went abroad ; we have not a hedge that is broken ; the entire estate is in the most perfect order. Can you explain the cause of this epidemic ?"

"Yes, the cause is perfectly easy to explain, per-

fectly simple. The drainage which goes down the main street of the village is absolutely wrongly planned; the entire village will have to be re-drained. It will cost a great deal of money, I am sorry, but it will cost a very great deal of money."

"Never mind what it costs; but how am I to know that new drainage will be efficacious? Your predecessor was an excellent man of business, a man of most enlightened ideas, great sympathy with the poor; and I always regarded him as an exceedingly intelligent person. The present drainage is entirely arranged on his plan; his ideas have been carried out to the last detail. Now, what guarantee have I that if I carry out your ideas I shall be any better off than I am now?"

"Well," said he, smiling and shrugging his shoulders, "I can give you no guarantee, none whatever. I can only tell you what I believe would be the safest plan of drainage for this village. My predecessor did the same thing. He knew the village and the ground in the neighbourhood better than I do, because he had been here for twenty years, and his plan has proved to be wrong. If I were you, Mrs. Bladensbrook, as money is not an object with you, I would have a big man down from town and go over the ground with him, so as to get him to give you his reasons for everything that he suggests. It would be a little dearer in the beginning, but such a plan would pay you in the end."

"That is a good idea. Now, who would you advise me to consult?"

"Well, the most practical authority on drainage that I know is Sir Herbert Silver—excellent, all-round, safe man, not brilliant, no fireworks, but a simple, practical, and thoroughly understandable authority. He has won his honours by sheer dominant hard work and common sense. He will charge you a hundred guineas, but you will get the best advice that you can get in the world."

"I will send for him at once," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

A few days later the great authority on drainage came down to Bladensbrook. He was entertained by the mistress of the house, and as they sat at dinner on the evening of his arrival she explained to him thoroughly what had happened in the past, what she was prepared to do in the future. "You will quite understand, Sir Herbert," she said, "that I have no wish to throw away my son's money. I don't want to spend money on useless ornamentation or on fads, but the drainage is absolutely wrong, and it must be altered. I want to have the best that you can suggest to us; I want it to be good and lasting; I want my son's people to be well, to live in peace and without fear of this terrible scourge returning upon them. To-morrow morning I will take you all over the village, and the district-surveyor will meet you. You can give him the benefit of your opinions; it was he who suggested that I should consult you."

"I shall be very pleased to meet him," said Sir Herbert. "I fancy your last man, Vincent, was a bit of a dreamer. I had to overhaul some work

of his not many months ago about fifteen or twenty miles from here—at Colbrook.”

“Oh, yes, of course. So you were consulted then?”

“Yes. His idea was good, you know; it was very good, it was scholarly, it was beautifully worked out. I assure you the plans we have were worth framing, but they were not practical. Now, in drainage, you first of all want to be practical. One man can draw you a plan with a bit of blue pencil on the back of an old envelope that will work better for a generation than the plans of another man that have taken weeks to bring to perfection. That is the kind of work that Vincent turned out—wonderful details, nicely rounded little edges to everything, bits of trimming here and there, all very nice and dainty, but very provocative of typhus and such-like things. I wonder you have got along as well as you have done. From a letter I had from Mr. Hardy, I gather that all your places were overhauled two years ago. I suppose you spent a good bit then?”

“Oh, a great deal, a great deal. The village was not redrained, not as far as the main was concerned, but every cottage was separately attended to.”

“Ah, that is just it; that accounts for it. If the cottages had been let alone and left on the old system—which must be about twenty years old—they would probably have worked right enough. Vincent went and ordered new-fangled house arrangements to be joined on to old-fashioned main

arrangements. The best thing that you can do is to root the whole affair up and put in a new system from beginning to end."

"That was exactly what Mr. Hardy suggested."

"Hardy? Ah, he is a sensible man, a good practical man. I have had my eye on him for some time, a very practical man. However, I can tell you more definitely in the morning in five minutes than I can if I talk the whole of to-night," with which hint Mrs. Bladensbrook changed the subject.

It was well for the people of Bladensbrook that "Madam" had been in the habit of ruling the affairs of the estate with a high hand. Like all country people they were bitterly suspicious of any manner of innovation, and the presence of typhus notwithstanding, they were intensely resentful of the presence of the district-surveyor and of the strange gentleman from London. It was bad enough to have "Madam" herself poking in and out of their houses, consulting with the doctor and talking over their cases, but to have "Madam" peering into their wells, sniffing at their drainage arrangements, and discussing what they considered their most private affairs with a person whom they had never seen before, was almost beyond the bounds of human endurance. "Madam" herself, however, was quite unconscious of this. She went to and fro, walked here and there, sniffed and poked and pried—at least, that was the way that the villagers put it among themselves. To "Madam" herself it was but the most ordinary kind of inspection

that she conceived to be her duty to her son's tenantry.

These inspections and consultations resulted in Mrs. Bladensbrook remaining among her people for several weeks. Every few days she heard from Margot, giving her rapturous accounts of the increasing beauty and vitality of her wonderful baby. "He grows more lovely every day," Margot wrote. "I know even you will say, when you come back again, that he is not at all like other babies, that he is anything but an atom, being an immensely large, strong, fine boy. He laughs at us now and crows and gurgles and chuckles like a parrot."

"I suppose that means," said Mrs. Bladensbrook to herself, "that the child is afflicted with the wind. That was what they always told me when Godfrey was a baby and crowed and smiled at the angels and such-like." She therefore wrote back to Margot, "Try peppermint," a proposition which set Margot, Nancy, and the nurse fairly chattering in their wrath and indignation.

And during the whole of this time not one word of news came about Godfrey. Mrs. Bladensbrook was pining at home and Margot was semi-pining at Grigon, but no word or line came from Godfrey. During almost every day the Rector came up and he was very eager for news of Margot. He suppressed his natural inclination and asked after her in a very steady and almost indifferent voice. Mrs. Bladensbrook saw through the pretence, however, and tried her utmost to let him know, without putting it too plainly, that Margot was not for him, but

the Rector either could not or would not perceive her meaning. He taught her several new games of Patience, and discussed the drainage question from every conceivable point of view excepting that of the villagers, and every now and again he would bring the conversation back to the old Rector or the Rectory and then to Margot, and gently hinted his desire for information concerning her. "Why did you not bring Miss Dangerfield back with you?"

"Oh, I thought it was most dangerous her coming into a place where there was a chance of her getting infection," she answered, promptly.

"There is no danger at the House."

"No, perhaps not; but Margot has not been very well. She felt her father's death a great deal, and she is not as strong as I could wish. I thought she was much better left at Grigon with Nancy. The climate suits her to perfection; she is much better since she went there; but, still, I was afraid to venture on her coming home."

At last the Rector, with a certain accession of colour in his face, blurted out something of the truth. "Well, Mrs. Bladensbrook," he said, "I don't mind frankly owning up that I am fearfully disappointed. When I heard that you were coming home, and your people told me that they had sent for you—or practically sent for you—I thought of course that Margot was coming home with you, and I counted very much on seeing her. The fact is, Mrs. Bladensbrook, I am getting tired of living alone at the Rectory."

"You are thinking of marrying?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, in a distant sort of voice.

"I am very anxious to marry."

"You want to marry Margot?"

"I should like to marry Margot."

"My dear Rector," said she, very quietly, "when I offered you the living, I confess to you that I thought you were attracted by Margot, and I thought it would be a delightful arrangement if you two were to make a match of it; but, since then, circumstances have arisen which have led me to believe that no such arrangement will ever come to pass."

"But why not?"

"Because Margot is not at all fit to be your wife—no, don't misunderstand me, I don't mean in that sense at all—but Margot is—is—well, there is somebody else."

"Margot is engaged?"

"No, I don't say that. I cannot tell you as much as I know, but Margot has other views. She will never be your wife, Mr. Morris."

"You are sure?"

"I am quite sure of it, and when I tell you that this has been one of my dearest wishes, you will understand that I do not speak so definitely without having a definite reason."

"And he is at Grigon?" said he.

"No, she is there with Nancy. I have not seen him, but at the same time Margot will never marry you. I do hope that you won't take it very much to heart," she went on; "of course you cannot be

very, very much in love with Margot, very much attracted, I know, very fond of her I know, too, but you will look out for somebody else. I am sorry about it, very sorry, but believe me it is quite out of the question."

"My dear Mrs. Bladensbrook," said the Rector, "pray don't say anything more about it. Margot cares for another, and that is sufficient. I don't say that I shall not marry somebody else, because I have always felt that man was not made to live alone, and Bladensbrook is not the most lively place in the world, especially when you are away from it. I thank you so very much for your frankness and your kindness to me in every way."

Mrs. Bladensbrook sat for some time after he had left her wondering whether Margot had, in taking this mysterious husband of hers, done as well for her life's happiness as if she had taken the steady, solid, good Rector. "How strange it is," her thoughts ran, "that these young creatures show so little discrimination in choosing their lovers. One would think that a man so eminently attractive, so brilliant in conversation, so full of wit and good humour and sound common sense, with his exceptional qualities as a preacher, his splendid gifts of organization, his family, his present position, that he would have been the beau ideal of a young girl's love; but, no, she gives her whole life away into the keeping of some fellow who skulks out of sight. It is very curious. Well, what is it, Matthew?"

"Mrs. Blake is in the drawing-room, M'm."

"What Mrs. Blake?" asked Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Mrs. Blake, M'm; Mr. Dangerfield's sister."

"Mrs. Blake!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, in intense astonishment.

"In the drawing-room, M'm," said Matthew.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ASTOUNDING NEWS.

MRS. BLADENSBROOK went at once to her visitor in the drawing-room. "I had no idea that you were in the neighbourhood," she said, as she held out her hand.

"I came into the neighbourhood especially to see you," replied Mrs. Blake, in a portentous tone.

"Yes? I am very pleased to see you, of course," Mrs. Bladensbrook replied. It was not quite true, but it was as true as many of the every-day amenities of society usually are.

"I don't know that you will be so pleased to see me when you have heard why I have come," said Mrs. Blake, in very dignified accents.

"My dear lady, that sounds like a revelation of some kind."

"I *have* a revelation to make to you."

"You don't say so? Stay, you had better come into my own sitting-room, had you not? We shall be undisturbed there by any other visitors." She

turned and led the way back to her own favourite room, and, having pointed out a comfortable chair to her visitor, sat down near to her and waited in an attitude of expectancy for the news which Mrs. Blake had to tell.

"First," said Mrs. Blake, "I want to ask you where is Margot, my niece?"

"Your niece, Margot, is at Grigon in Switzerland."

"Why did you not bring her over here?"

"Because I thought she was better away. She is waited on by Nancy, whom you must have known for many years, and of whom your brother, the Rector, had the very highest opinion. I knew my duty to my ward better than to expose her to the risk of contracting typhus fever in this village."

"And that was really the reason why you did not bring Margot home with you?"

"That was my principal reason," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, putting her head back against the high chair and looking at her visitor through half-closed eyes.

"Oh, has anything unusual happened to Margot, really unusual?"

"How do you mean?"

"Has it occurred to you that Margot is a different girl from what she was?"

"Yes, very different," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "She has felt her father's death most deeply."

"I do not mean anything connected with her father's death," said Mrs. Blake; "that is as may be; I was not there. As you are aware, neither my

brother nor his daughter thought me of sufficient importance to send for me, although I would gladly have joined them."

"That was not their reason at all," said Mrs. Bladensbrook in accents which she tried to make smooth and conciliatory. "I went over to Pau because I was in great anxiety, as I am still, and I wanted a little change. I saw the Rector was worse when I got there, and the end was very rapid. You must not indeed think that there was any desire to slight you on either side. My being there was more or less of an accident. Margot, poor child, took her father's death very much to heart; she has never been quite the same since. That was one reason why I took her to Switzerland."

"I see. Well, Mrs. Bladensbrook, I am going to put a very plain question to you."

"And I," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "will give you a plain answer if it is in my power to do so."

"Had you any idea that Margot was married?"

For a moment there was dead silence between the two ladies. Then Mrs. Bladensbrook opened her eyes and looked at her visitor. "I knew that Margot was married," she said.

"Indeed! And you felt justified in keeping that knowledge from me?"

"I did."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I am Margot's sole guardian, and I did not see the necessity of informing any one for the present."

"But why?"

"Because Margot did not wish the fact of her marriage to be divulged just yet."

"And may I ask why?"

"That," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "is more than I can tell you. Margot was married some time last year."

"You don't know when?"

"No; Margot has not told me. She has told me that she is married. She assures me that it is really so; that her marriage was quite straight and proper. She promised her husband not to divulge the marriage to anybody for a certain time. She asked me to trust her, and I have trusted her to the extent of not trying to find out anything about it."

"And you don't know to whom she was married?"

"No, Mrs. Blake; I have not the smallest idea."

Mrs. Blake drew a long breath. "Mrs. Bladensbrook," she said at last, "what I have to say to you will astonish you greatly unless I am very much mistaken. I happen to have found out by the merest accident when, where, and to whom my niece, Margot, was married. She was married last August, nearly a year ago, at a church in Brixham, to your son, Godfrey Bladensbrook."

"What? Margot is married to Godfrey? To Godfrey, my son?"

"To Godfrey, your son. I have brought you a copy of the marriage certificate. There is no doubt about it whatever."

"And the date?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Was the 16th of August of last year."

"God Almighty!" Mrs. Bladensbrook ejaculated, while through her bewildered brain there rang a rapid calculation that the marriage had taken place four days before Godfrey's disappearance. For some little time she did not speak, her mind was travelling back over the past few months, and a thousand things were made clear which had been mysterious so far—little signs and tokens, tricks of manner, glances, inflexions of her voice, trifles which told her that she ought to have known from the very beginning who was the husband so mysteriously kept in the background, who was the father of Margot's child, why she had wished that child to be called Ralph.

"I am afraid," said Mrs. Blake, in a dangerously polite voice, "that this has been a great blow to you, Mrs. Bladensbrook. Possibly Margot is not the wife you would have chosen for your son."

"My dear lady," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, with decision, "I should never at any time have dreamt of interfering with my son's choice. I am exceedingly fond of Margot, and she is quite the wife I would have chosen for Godfrey, provided always that Godfrey's choice lay in that direction. My son was quite old enough and quite sensible enough to choose his wife without consultation with me. I admit to you that you have *surprised* me very much. I don't understand why this marriage was made in secret, or why it was kept a secret; but, at the same time, neither do I understand why my son Godfrey has been invisible for nearly twelve months. I am not at all surprised that Margot did

not tell me to whom she was married. She had promised him that, until he gave her leave, she would not divulge the marriage, and, therefore, she was perfectly right to keep her word to him. It is quite what I should have expected of Margot. I feel more glad now that I trusted her implicitly from the first. Being her guardian, I might have made her life very much more unhappy and anxious than it is. It is easy now to understand a great deal that has puzzled me very much in the immediate past. By the bye, how did you find out about the marriage?"

"I discovered it," said Mrs. Blake, "by the merest accident. You will remember that last year—or, perhaps, you never knew it—but as a matter of fact I went last year to Switzerland, and thence to Italy for the winter. Margot was staying with me up to the time of my leaving. She was to pay another visit to some friends at Heckmansworth, and was to have left by an earlier train than I did. She raised an objection to doing so, saying that she preferred to get there in time for dinner. She never paid that visit at all. She wired to them late in the evening that she had been detained, and that she would follow later. The following day she wrote to this lady saying that she was not easy about her father, and would prefer to go home in three days' time, therefore she would put off her visit for some months. Several days passed before she returned home to Bladensbrook. During those days she was married to your son, as the paper in my hand is sufficient to show."

"And how did you find out?" Mrs. Bladensbrook asked.

"Well, I did not go back to Brixham until the end of May. I stayed all the winter in Italy, and then I went home by way of Geneva and stayed a few days in that neighbourhood. I also stayed a few days in Paris, and I reached home at the end of May. I happened several evenings ago to be dining with a friend, a friend who had known Margot, having seen her in my house. She asked me in the most casual way if it were true that her father was dead, and I replied that it was; so she asked, then, where she was, and I replied that she had been left to your guardianship, and that I believed she was with you in Switzerland. The gentleman who had taken me into dinner was the Rector of an adjoining parish; he turned round and said, 'What was the name of the lady who has been left guardian to your niece?' 'Mrs. Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook,' I replied. 'Ah,' said he, 'that is a very uncommon name, isn't it?' I told him that I did not believe there was another family of the same name in England, that it was a very uncommon name. 'Well,' he remarked, 'not many months ago a young fellow called Bladensbrook was married in my church. It was while I was away, but I noticed the very uncommon name in the register the next time I had occasion to open it. It was a special license marriage, and the girl's name was——' However, he could not remember what the girl's name was beyond the fact that it was an uncommon name, like that of the bride-

groom. 'I will look it up the next time I am in the vestry,' he said, 'and when I see you again I will let you know who the girl was.' The following afternoon he came to see me, bringing me this slip of paper. I saw in a moment that it was Margot who was married to your son. I then went to Mrs. Meredith, at Heckmansworth, and found out all that she knew, and I thought it my duty to come on here and acquaint you with the true state of affairs."

Mrs. Bladensbrook drew a long breath. "My dear lady," she said, "you have astonished me very much. I don't know that I was ever so much astonished in my whole life before. I must say, however, I am very glad that my son's wife is so exactly what I would have chosen for him. Now that you have acquainted me with this great secret, Margot will, of course, be released from that part of her promise to Godfrey, and together we may bring to light some facts which may help us to a discovery of where he is."

"You don't know where he is?" asked Mrs. Blake.

"I have not the very smallest idea. I had a letter from my son dated the 20th of August last. He promised to meet me the following day at the Alexandra Hotel in London. He never came to meet me. I have never seen or heard a single word of him from that day to this."

"But he may be dead!" Mrs. Blake cried.

Mrs. Bladensbrook shook her head. "I don't think that Godfrey is dead. I have never thought so.

I believe if he were dead, that he would have found some means of letting me know it, so as to put my anxiety at an end. No, there is a reason, a very mysterious reason ; what it is I cannot imagine ; but I am convinced that when Godfrey comes home he will explain everything to my full satisfaction."

"It is just as well that you think so," said Mrs. Blake, dryly. "Then I suppose you will send for the young lady at once and try to get something more of the truth out of her?"

"No," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "I shall certainly not send for Margot. I don't think that this place is fit for any young girl to live in if she can possibly keep away from it—indeed, to one coming fresh from the pure Swiss air it would be most dangerous, worse than for those who have lived in it during the whole time of the epidemic. When I have quite finished my business here, I shall go back to Grigon, and then Margot and I will talk everything over together."

I think that Mrs. Blake felt that she had never really known Mrs. Bladensbrook. She felt that a woman who was capable of hearing such important news without going into hysterics over it was a being with whom she had no power to cope. "Well, I confess," she said, not a little indignantly, "that I cannot understand your attitude. I should have thought that you would be furious and indignant at being kept in the dark in this shameful way. I feel myself that I can never forgive Margot for having gone out of my house and deceived me so utterly, for having behaved in this sly and

underhand manner. I had intended to leave Margot a large share of my property, but after this I shall be very much disposed to change my intention entirely."

"I think," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "that you had far better leave what money you wish to the two boys, Jim and Jack. They are dear, good, honest, open boys, and they have none too much of this world's goods. As it is, Margot will never require more money than she will have as my son's wife."

"But if your son never comes back again the estate then goes to another; it passes from this branch, does it not?" said Mrs. Blake, who knew perfectly well the exact history of the Bladensbrook family.

"That is so; but that consideration I think will not need to trouble Margot or myself. A long time must elapse before the law would be satisfied that my son was dead. I, for one, shall never believe it until I have the most absolute proof of it. My position is, of course, assured in any case; but if the worst came to the worst, and I knew that I was childless, Margot's position would be just the same as it is to-day. Whether Godfrey ever returns home or not, Margot will always be secure in her position as the mother of his child."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WIDE OF THE MARK.

WHEN Mrs. Bladensbrook made known the information to her visitor that Margot was the mother of a child, that lady realized all at once that the great bomb-shell which she had intended to drop into the Bladensbrook household had fallen utterly wide of its mark. In truth, Mrs. Blake was bitterly angry that the Rector had left his daughter to the guardianship of Mrs. Bladensbrook rather than allowing that office to devolve upon her. Mrs. Blake had always liked Margot. She had never had a child of her own, and she had always felt somewhat of a grudge against the Rector in that he had been blessed with three. She was a woman who loved hectoring over others; she loved to make Margot feel that she must obey the commands which she laid upon her, and she had thought that in the event of her brother's death she would be left Margot's sole guardian, and that until she was one-and-twenty at least she would remain, body and soul, so to speak, at her disposal. All these nice little plans had been frustrated by the Rector's action in leaving Margot to the care of Mrs. Bladensbrook, and it was with a feeling almost of vindictiveness that she had hurried off to lay bare the whole truth before that lady as soon as she discovered the fact of Margot's marriage to

Godfrey; and then to find that after all she had only known half the story, to discover that Mrs. Bladensbrook was evidently more relieved than words could tell, to find that she had only brought welcome information, and that her shot had absolutely failed in its intention, was truly exceedingly bitter to her. "I will ask you," she said with much dignity, "to ring for the fly which brought me here."

As Mrs. Blake grew more angry, Mrs. Bladensbrook became more suave and gracious. "No, no; I cannot hear of your going like this. You are staying the night in Exhampton. I will ring for tea; it will be here in a few minutes, and then you will stay and have some dinner with me?"

"No, I thank you, I thank you very much. I return this evening."

"Not to Brixham, surely?"

"Not to Brixham. I go to London."

"In that case, of course, I cannot detain you," said Mrs. Bladensbrook; "but there is no train to London until the one at five minutes after six o'clock. As it is now but a little after four, you have lots of time to have a cup of tea before you go. I beg you will not refuse me. I shall be very unhappy and uncomfortable if you go without having anything."

Thus adjured, Mrs. Blake consented very stiffly, indeed, to remain for a cup of tea.

"Matthew," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, when that bland personage came to her in answer to her summons, "let us have tea immediately, and don't

admit any other visitors—no, not even the Rector. Mrs. Blake and I have still something to talk over. But do you let us have tea at once, and a nice tea—something hot, muffins, toast, I don't know—as nice as you can bring. And Mrs. Blake's cabman, see that he has a thoroughly good tea, and that the horse is fed and all that; and Mrs. Blake would like to have her cab at the door—what time shall we say, Mrs. Blake? A quarter to five? That will give you half an hour longer."

"Yes, thank you; a quarter to five," said Mrs. Blake.

"That will get you back in nice time for the train—in very good time for the train. Yes, Matthew, as quickly as you can."

The discreet Matthew bustled noiselessly away and returned so soon that it was evident the tea had been actually on its way when his mistress had summoned him. Mrs. Blake was herself a rich woman, but a woman who did not make the best use of her riches—I mean who did not extract the utmost comfort and enjoyment out of the amount of money that she annually spent. She looked at the delicate tea-cloth with its deep edge of coarse lace, at the great silver tray and small extra table set out with good things, a glass and silver jar filled with the daintiest bon-bons, a covered dish containing the "something hot" Mrs. Bladensbrook had asked for, and a charming arrangement with several compartments holding different kinds of bread and butter, cake and biscuits. She realized that although none of this was beyond her means,

yet that she could never induce her servants to serve afternoon tea quite in the same way. "I suppose it is with being a manufacturing town," her thoughts ran; "these servants have been here forever. It must make a great difference; mine are always aching to get married."

They were very friendly over the little meal, but did not revert in any way further to the news which Mrs. Blake had brought, and when the time was drawing near for her departure, Mrs. Blake asked how long her hostess would be remaining at Bladensbrook.

"I cannot very well leave for a few days," she replied. "Of course, there is no particular hurry, as Margot is quite safe with Nancy and her nurse."

"You won't go back on purpose?"

"No; I shall not go back until I have finished my business here," Mrs. Bladensbrook replied.

"And what do you intend to do afterwards?"

"To do? I don't quite understand you."

"There's my fly, so that I cannot explain myself fully; but do you expect me to be silent about this marriage?"

"By no means," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Tell everybody—the sooner the better. You will leave me that certificate, won't you? I shall need it for several reasons."

"Then you mean to announce the marriage?"

"Certainly. I shall do so as soon as I have seen Margot. I would do so at once, only she is not very strong yet, and it would be unwise to spring the

news upon her. "Well, so you must go? Well, good-bye, dear lady, and thank you so very much for bringing me this news. You have gladdened my heart more than words of mine can express to you."

In the face of such a sentiment as this Mrs. Blake had no choice but to grin and nod her head and take both Mrs. Bladensbrook's dainty hands, and finally get herself back into the dingy fly, nodding and jerking her hand to and fro like a dilapidated mandarin. She was very angry, but it was no use being angry with Mrs. Bladensbrook. Nobody could show anger to a woman who had received such a piece of news in such a manner.

Meantime, Mrs. Bladensbrook had gone back into the house and sat down again just where she had been sitting during the time that her visitor had been with her. So this was the bottom of the mystery, and Godfrey and Margot were man and wife, father and mother of that child! It was very strange. It was something more than strange. And how odd to think that she had never once suspected it; she ought to have known it, it was plain enough to be seen—for any one that had eyes to see. The likeness of the child to Godfrey was so strong that now she wondered what she could have been thinking of to have watched that child day after day and not have known just where to place the likeness. But all this brought her no nearer to the whereabouts of Godfrey. She felt sure that Margot was as much in the dark as she herself; she felt convinced that if she had known

anything of Godfrey's whereabouts she would not have looked so desolate, so heart-broken as she had done for months before the birth of the child. Yet, why had this marriage been kept a secret? What could have been Godfrey's reason? He could have had no real reason except possibly an entanglement with another woman. Well, she must possess her soul in patience until she found herself back at Grigon and was able to elicit from Margot any information that she might happen to possess.

At this moment Matthew came discreetly in. "The Rector, Madam, is coming up the drive. Will you receive him?"

"Oh, certainly. It was only that Mrs. Blake wanted to talk something over, Matthew. Certainly I will see the Rector. Bring in some fresh tea."

"My dear Rector," she said, a moment later, "you have just missed our esteemed friend, Mrs. Blake—Aunt Marcia. Ah, I forget! You do not know her as I do. She is a somewhat grewsome lady of gloomy aspects and a blighted kind of existence. I never could tell why Aunt Marcia always seemed to be blighted. She is very comfortably off; she has no one to say her nay; she comes and goes as she likes, and is blessed with excellent health, but still she always seems to take a gloomy pleasure in seeing the worst of everything and of everybody—a curious habit, a very curious habit."

"And of whom has she been seeing the worst now?"

"Well, she has not exactly been seeing the worst of anybody—Oh, I didn't mean that for a moment, but she brought me a piece of news. You remember what I told you about Margot some time ago?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly," said the Rector.

"Well, Mrs. Blake by a mere chance happened to light upon a piece of news which I might almost call the fulfilment of what I told you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Margot—I had better tell you without breaking it to you, you are a man and men take things more easily than women do—Margot is married."

"Margot is married?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, Rector, I have known for some time that Margot was married, since just after the death of our friend, in fact."

"You don't mean it!"

"Yes. Did it never strike you as possible?"

"Never."

"Well, Margot is married. I knew it; I taxed her with it. She admitted it, and she implored me to ask no questions and to find out nothing for a time, as she was under a promise to say nothing. I am very fond of the child, and I consented. Margot was married last August."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, true. She is very much married. She—in fact, there is a baby."

"Mrs. Bladensbrook!"

"That was the reason I did not bring her home

—one reason, at least—with me this time. Mrs. Blake to-day brought me the news of the wedding. It was no news to me, but she brought me a piece of information which was news to me—*great* news to me, astounding news. Margot was married on the 16th of August last to my son. Margot's little child is my grandson—Godfrey's heir!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

COMMON SENSE.

As soon as she could free herself of the business matters at Bladensbrook, Mrs. Bladensbrook returned with as little delay as possible to the Swiss town where she left Margot and the child. Her meeting with Margot in the new guise of her son's wife was very characteristic of Mrs. Bladensbrook. She met her exactly as if she had learned nothing, admired the child, talked a little with the nurse, was graciously commendatory to Nancy, and said not one word of the knowledge which had come to her ears until they had dined and she and Margot were sitting in their sitting-room alone together. Then she as characteristically plunged straight into the subject. "My dear child," she said, "I have a great piece of news for you."

"You have heard something of Godfrey?" said Margot, turning her startled eyes upon Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Yes, I have heard something of Godfrey, but not of Godfrey's whereabouts. It is no use beating about the bush, Margot; it is better for me to tell you at once that I know who your husband is and the father of your child, my grandson, Ralph Bladensbrook."

Margot half jumped up from her seat, then sank back into it with a scared white face and trembling hands. "How did you hear?" she asked.

"I tried to find out nothing," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, putting out a cool, steady hand and laying it upon the girl's shaking fingers. "I trusted you, and I had given you my promise, and therefore I never thought for a moment of trying in any way to spy upon your reserve, or of trying to make you break your promise to one who is absent, but I had a visitor whilst I was at home, a visitor whose presence surprised me more than I can tell you. I think it was a surprise to herself."

"A lady?" said Margot.

"A lady—your Aunt Marcia."

"Aunt Marcia!"

"Yes. Apparently she came over from Brixham—a good long journey, Margot—on purpose to tell me the astounding news that you were married. Well, of course, my dear child, that was no news to me, though I was surprised to find that you were married to Godfrey."

"And you didn't mind?" cried Margot.

"I should not mind at all if we knew where Godfrey was, and why he is keeping out of our sight in this inexplicable manner. But, now that

you are released from the necessity of any longer hiding from me who your husband is, there can be no reason why you should not confide in me as fully as lies in your power; and I have great hopes, Margot, that through such confidence we may gain a clue to Godfrey's present whereabouts."

"Oh, I can tell you all now," said Margot, "all that has been so carefully kept back from you because of my promise; all that I have been dying to tell you, and that I feel sure you have been wanting to hear, even though you did not know it was Godfrey all the time. You see, dear lady, I was bound by my promise. I had no choice but to obey Godfrey's wishes, particularly as he was so soon lost to me. But do tell me—Aunt Marcia, was she very angry?"

"Yes, yes, she was rather angry," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "She indignantly refused tea—I asked her to dinner, but she rejected that proposal with contumely, not to say upbraiding—I finally persuaded her to have tea, and she made a very good tea. I took particular notice of that because she was so instant in refusing it at first. Well, she is rather angry, Margot, and she doesn't think that she is going to leave you any money."

"Oh," said Margot, "I shall get over that."

"I politely told her so. I very politely and suavely recommended her to leave anything that she has to spare from other purposes to your brothers. I told her that under any circumstances you would never want money. Whether she will take my advice or not, of course, remains to be

seen. Of course, it was a tremendous card being able to tell me that your husband was my son, Godfrey, but on the other hand I had quite a check-mate in being able to tell her of my grandson, Ralph. I enjoyed the interview. I also told Mr. Morris."

"You told *him*," breathed Margot.

"My dear child, I announced it to the servants, of course I did. I don't know Godfrey's reasons for keeping the marriage secret; they are to me inexplicable, seeing that he had nobody but himself to consult; but as the marriage is known to more than one person, to persons whom we could not ask to keep such a matter secret and who will, indeed, make a point of spreading the information wherever they go, it is better to be prepared at once for action, and to that end I shall immediately announce your marriage and the birth of the child in all the leading English papers. By the bye, Margot, what was the reason that you and Godfrey kept this matter secret at all?"

"Dear Mrs. Bladensbrook," cried Margot, sinking down in a heap on the floor at her mother-in-law's feet, "I can tell you everything now—so far as I know it. Godfrey and I had been engaged ever so long—well, engaged in this way. He didn't ask me to marry him because, as he said, he was so ridiculously young and I was still worse, but we understood each other, and then when he came of age—oh, surely, you must have noticed something?"

"Not a thing, my dear. I had no suspicion of the truth whatever."

"Well, he did speak out then, and I said that we were so awfully young I felt that people would laugh at us, and I made him promise to wait until his next birthday before he announced it, and then, of course, I would have been married in three months or four months, just as he chose. Of course, you quite understand that I didn't bind Godfrey in any way. I told him that he ought to see other girls, that he might change. I wouldn't hear of anything binding."

"I see. In short, you acted very discreetly."

"Well, then I was staying with Auntie at Brixham. It was very dull, and I hated being with Auntie; she is so uncomfortable to live with, always fussing after the servants and never satisfied with anything, and always spying around and wanting to see one's letters and generally making herself a nuisance; and really I had done quite a long duty visit, and I was awfully tired of being there with Auntie, and I had promised to go and pay a little visit to Mrs. Meredith. Well, I had to go past, or at least very near to, Blankhampton, and Godfrey had been writing to me, since some little time, indeed, and I suggested, or he suggested, or it came about somehow, that he should meet me on the journey and travel with me until he saw me safe into the second train which would take me to Mrs. Meredith's station. Of course, I suppose it was rather wrong. Auntie would have been furious if she had known, but still we were engaged, you know. And the train got smashed up."

"With you in it?"

"Yes. There were several people killed. You won't remember the accident, but it was in a tunnel just before you get to Ruxfurd, and all my things were smashed up, my box was found under the engine—I can't tell you how dreadful it was. And of course I couldn't get on to Heckmansworth, for the tunnel was blocked and was not likely to be cleared in time for me to get on that night. Well, eventually we got back to Brixham, and I telegraphed to Mrs. Meredith that she was not to expect me. I said my plans were changed, and so on, and then I wrote to her and told her that I was rather uneasy about Father—which was true, you know—and that I would prefer going home and paying my visit to her later. Then I had to think of going home and arriving with no clothes. I knew if I said I was in a railway accident that Father would apply for my things, and you see, Godfrey, in a moment of real recklessness when the guard asked him for his name, said 'Smith, of London,' and that I was his sister! I don't know what possessed him—he said afterwards that he didn't know himself—but I was in an awful state and frightened to death, and I thought that perhaps you would object to me altogether if you knew, and so he determined that he would rush up to town the next morning and get a special license. And so he did, and we were married the next afternoon."

"Then you went back to the hotel as Mr. and Mrs. Bladensbrook?"

"No, we went to the hotel as Mr. and Miss Smith. He went up to town that night—I forgot

that—he went up by the last train, by the mail, and we were married at five o'clock in the afternoon at the church, the certificate says—I forget the name—and then we went to another hotel as Mr. and Mrs. Smith."

"But, my dear child, why as Mr. and Mrs. Smith?"

"Well, it was like this. We went to see after my clothes. We found that there was no chance of getting anything except just a little box that had some trinkets in it, everything else was ruined, and I only wanted to stay long enough to get a few things so that nobody would notice the absence of luggage when I got home. Of course, Nancy *did* notice, and I had to put her off with the best excuse I could. Well, the first person we saw when we got to Ruxfurd was the guard who had seen us when we first got out of the wrecked train. He recognized us at once, and told Godfrey he thought he might be wanted at the inquest, and Godfrey thought as he had given the name of Smith he had better stick to it whilst he was in the neighbourhood. Well, he intended to meet you on the Monday, and told me everything about it, and that he should take an opportunity of disclosing everything to you. I parted from him on the Saturday and he went back to Blankhampton, and I have never heard or seen anything of him since except two letters I have had."

"You have had a letter from him?"

"Yes, I had a letter from him on the day you went to meet him in London. I have been burst-

ing to tell you. I felt that I ought to tell you, and yet because of my promise I have been obliged to keep it locked up in my breast. That is why I have been so wan and wretched. It is only darling Baby that has lifted the load a little from my heart."

"My poor child!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "there is no reason to distress yourself. I am quite sure that Godfrey has some good reason for this curious disappearance of his. What did he say on the morning that you heard from him?"

"Stay, I will go and get you the two letters," said Margot. She jumped up from her lowly position and ran into the adjoining room, that is to say, her bedroom. In a few minutes she came back carrying a small jewel-box, which she unlocked and from which she took two letters and handed them to Mrs. Bladensbrook. The first was the letter which she had received on the 20th of August of the previous year.

"I told you so!" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, as soon as her eyes had scanned the page. "I knew there was a reason for it. Now what *is* that reason?"

"Nay," said Margot, "I have racked my brains day and night wondering what could have happened to make Godfrey turn his back deliberately and unmistakably and by his own will—as you will see when you read this letter—upon all of us. I might have thought that he had repented; but still, if he had, Godfrey Bladensbrook would never have turned his back upon the victim of such a mistake. Besides—there is the other letter."

"Let me read it," said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

But the second letter was more inexplicable than the first one. "What in the wide world can it mean?" said Godfrey's mother.

"It is a mystery," said Godfrey's wife, "and I have been trying to fathom it ever since the 20th of last August."

For some little time Mrs. Bladensbrook sat profoundly silent leaning her head upon her hands. Margot did not dare to interrupt her by so much as a word; then at last Godfrey's mother looked up and spoke. "Margot, my child," she said, in a tone of one who has come to a complete conclusion after long thinking, "I will tell you what we will do first of all. We will get this marriage of yours thoroughly announced, so that there shall be no mistake upon that score, then we will leave this place and we will go home. We cannot perhaps take the child to Bladensbrook; we will see what sort of a bill of health the place shows in a week's time—if we cannot take him there, he shall go to some seaside place where you can easily join him—then you and I will go to Brixham——"

"Not to Brixham!" cried Margot.

"Oh, yes; we are not obliged to stay with your Aunt Marcia, that would be a most unnecessary complication of affairs. We will go to Brixham, and we will see if we cannot trace out the career of Mr. William Smith, of London, from the time at which you parted with him believing he was to return direct to Blankhampton."

"It might do," said Margot, doubtfully, "but I

don't believe that an ordinary person like William Smith, who practically came from nowhere and apparently went to nowhere will be easy to trace."

"Not easy, perhaps," said Mrs. Bladensbrook; "but it is a chance, and you and I will follow it to the very end. And now, my dear child, you must remember this—there is to be no more *dolce far niente* with that baby of yours. He is very precious and very beautiful, I admit, and the wonder to me is that I did not see the likeness in him to Godfrey. He is exactly like what Godfrey was at that time of day, the likeness is ludicrous. It only shows how blind we are until things are pointed out to us—but, charming and delightful as little Ralph is, you and I have sterner work to do than to make love to him. You must lose no chance of getting strong and well, able to bear fatigue, suspense and anxiety—we do not know what may be before us, we do not know how far our strength may be taxed; you must eat, drink, walk, sleep, do everything to make yourself fit and strong, strong to endure and fit to help me to find Godfrey. I feel perfectly certain that there is some awful and dreadful mistake at the bottom of all this business. I don't know why I should have had such a conviction, but you will remember from the very first I put aside all idea of Godfrey being dead. I knew Godfrey was living. I feel as certain now that if we make an effort we shall succeed in finding him."

"I will do anything that you tell me. I will do anything that you wish," said Margot.

"That is my good child—that is my own daugh-

ter, my son's wife, my grandson's mother," exclaimed Mrs. Bladensbrook, in what for her was quite a gush of tenderness. "Then, Margot, our first task will be to announce the truth to Nancy and the nurse."

"That is as you think best," said Margot.

Mrs. Bladensbrook did announce the news to Nancy in quite her own characteristic fashion, and Nancy, who stood in as much awe and admiration of the lady of Bladensbrook, received the information with uplifted hands and many expressions of wonder which, as a matter of fact, were indications of a position a very long way from the actual truth.

"I guessed all along who my young lady's husband was," she said to the nurse, when they were discussing their breakfast."

"What! You knew?"

"I didn't know, of course. As you went and registered the child and answered all the questions about the baby at the baptism, I knew, of course, that you knew. I didn't ask you, because it wasn't my business to find out what my young mistress wanted to keep a secret—I preferred to know nothing of it—but at the same time I have always had eyes in my head, and I always thought that Mr. Bladensbrook was the man."

"What made you think so?" asked the nurse.

"Why, didn't her husband and Madam's son disappear on the very same day? I have been wondering all along where Madam's wonderful wit was. They always say at home, at Bladensbrook, you know, that Madam can see through a two-inch

deal board and right through a stone wall, but I begin to have my doubts about Madam's wonderful quickness. And then my young lady, she goes and calls the child Ralph. Why the old squire that was kicked to death by his favourite hunter, he was called Ralph! And yet Madam never noticed it. Dear! How blind some of these clever people are."

"You knew, perhaps, that they were courting?"

"Well, I didn't know, not as a matter of fact," said Nancy, who was quite above any pretensions in the matter, "and I don't pretend to have second sight or anything of that kind, but I do pretend to have common sense and I used it."

"Ah," said the nurse, "for every-day hard wear recommend me to common sense."

A few days after this everybody who knew the name of Bladensbrook was startled by the appearance of two announcements in every English paper of note. They ran thus,—

On the 16th August, 18—, Godfrey Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook to Margot, only daughter of the Reverend William Dangerfield, Rector of Bladensbrook, Loamshire.

On May 9th, at Grigon, Switzerland, Mrs. Bladensbrook of Bladensbrook, Loamshire, of a son and heir.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"TO WILLIAM SMITH, OF LONDON."

IF an observant person had studied the agony column of the various papers on the day on which the announcements of Godfrey Bladensbrook's marriage and of the birth of his son and heir made their appearance, they would have noticed the following advertisement, which was addressed to "William Smith, of London." It ran thus:

"Your mother and wife entreat you to communicate with them. They cannot understand why you have remained silent so long. If you look at the papers carefully you will see interesting news concerning yourself. Now, that all is known there can be no reasonable necessity for your remaining out of sight any longer; at the same time your mother does not see why the necessity need ever have arisen, as you were at perfect liberty to please yourself in all matters concerning your mode of life. Your wife received your letters of August 9th, postmark Brixham, and February 17th, postmark London; and as you are aware is not able to answer them as you gave no address. You had better address, when writing, to Messrs. Wood & Co., 200 Old Jewry, London, E. C., as your wife and mother are not at home and will therefore receive the letter a day or more earlier."

There are always some curious persons who read their newspapers rather for the sake of gaining sensations than from a desire to learn the news of the day. A very estimable person confessed to me not long ago that the reason she never read a newspaper on Sunday was, not because she thought it particularly wicked, but because there was no

Court news in it. She was one of the strictest sect,—well, we will not say of the Pharisees,—but of a noted Nonconformist body which forbids the use of newspapers and other amusements on the Sabbath. But that was her candid opinion, her inside opinion, so to speak, not the opinion she gave to the world,—her world,—but the one which she gave to me. There is another class of persons who always read the agony column, and of the many who read it on the day when the advertisement to William Smith made its appearance, few there were who did not turn the paper inside and out scanning it eagerly to discover the interesting news for which William Smith had been bidden to search, but of all these there was only one who in any sense put two and two together, and that one did not put together the two and two of the agony and the “Hatch, Match, and Despatch” column. This one was a young lady at Brixham, in short, the daughter of the hotel-keeper at whose establishment Godfrey and Margot had passed their brief honeymoon. She read the announcement again and again, and then she carried the paper out of the bar into the private parlour where her father was enjoying his afternoon forty winks. “Are you awake, Dad?” she asked.

“Awake? Yes, I never go to sleep. I was only resting a bit.”

“Yes, I know, Dad, you were resting. But you are rested enough to let me show you something?”

“Why, yes, my dear, why shouldn’t I be?”

“Well, look here; here’s the queerest announce-

ment in the paper I have ever seen. And if it isn't mixed up with that William Smith! You know?"

"Yes."

"Well, read this," and she handed him the paper. "You see it mentions Brixham," she said.

"Ah, yes, that's 'im right enough," said the landlord.

"Then you may depend upon it his wife and his mother don't know where he is. Whether that was his wife here with him——"

"I don't believe it. If you remember at the time we said we didn't believe that they was really married."

"Well, Jessica said so, and so did Tom, but don't you think servants often get fancying things? Particularly when they are accustomed to hotel life. Jessica said that she had a handkerchief marked with something that was not N. S. He called her Nellie, and they called themselves Smith. Jessica said that he was wearing silver links that had not a W. nor an S. on them, but some other initials; she didn't have a chance of finding out what. She thought one was B."

"Yes, so she did."

"Well, it is very evident that the poor things don't know what got him."

"Well, it looks like it," said the landlord. "But you see, it is evident that he wrote to her on the 17th of February, now, how the dickens did he manage that? I wonder——"

"Nay," said the girl, "I suppose he got a friend

to do it for him. What will you do about it, Dad?"

"Well, my dear, I don't see that I can do anything about it."

"But won't you write?"

"Well, what is the good of writing? The feller was a swell, there's no doubt about that; but then there's plenty of swells that have uncommonly shady records. He has never let his wife and his mother know anything about what happened last year; I don't know that we ought to back on him and split. After all, he was a guest here and he paid up fair and square."

"But think what they must be suffering, Dad."

"Well, perhaps they'll suffer less if they are kept in ignorance than if they knew everything," said the landlord, prosaically. "Well, my girl, I really don't know what I had better do. There was something that wasn't quite explained in that affair—he said so at the time; don't you remember, Minnie, just before they went he turned round to me and he said in that 'igh and 'aughty way of his, 'I know exactly what this must look like, landlord, but the least said the soonest mended, and I have got to thank you very much for your attentions to us whilst we have been staying in your house.' I thought at the time," the landlord went on, "that there had been a mistake made, and I have thought so whenever the name of Smith has crossed my memory since."

"Then, Dad," said the girl, earnestly, "all the more reason that you should let his mother and his

wife know exactly what happened to him. If they do turn out to be people of position, they may be able to put everything straight yet."

"Well, my girl, I will do as you like, but you cannot undo what's been done; nothing on earth will ever undo what's 'appened between last August and to-day, so you may put that idea out of your mind at once for good and all."

However, egged on by his daughter's persistency and by the fact that the announcement to William Smith remained in the agony column, he was not in danger of forgetting his existence. After about a week had elapsed, the landlord of the King's Arms sat down at his desk and with labour indited a letter to the solicitors in Old Jewry who managed the most of Mrs. Bladensbrook's affairs.

"DEAR SIRs," he began, "I enclose a cutting from the *Daily Telegraph* addressed to one William Smith, of London. As your names are mentioned at the foot of the advertisement as being the proper persons to write to, I herewith write to let you know that the said gentleman, or one of the said name—but I believe it to be the same—stayed at my hotel for a few days during the August of last year. A young lady was with him at the time professing to be his wife, but as she left the previous day to the gentleman I cannot speak on that point. Any person requiring real information on the subject of the said William Smith can apply to me direct by letter or in person.

"Yours truly,

"JOHN TRIMMINS."

The letter done, John Trimmings went to the door and shouted for his daughter. "I am here, Dad," she cried, "I will come in a minute." And

surely enough in a very short time she appeared. "What do you want, Dad?"

"Well, I have written this letter you have been jacketting me about for a week past. Just come and cast your eye over it and tell me if you think it will do."

Thus bidden, the girl took the letter and read it from beginning to end. "Why," she said, "you have told them nothing!"

"Them that wants to 'ear anything perticular can take the trouble to come and 'ear it from me," said John Trimmings, sturdily. "I am going to write nothing that will incriminate me if I can 'elp it. John Trimmings is here and will answer any questions that is put to 'im, barring they are not too impudent. I 'ave given them a chance, and that is as much as anybody can expect of me."

"Oh, my dear Dad, it is very good of you, and I am very glad you have written. It will do quite well. You don't know how much good you may do that poor mother and wife."

Accordingly, the letter was posted, and in due time received by Mrs. Bladensbrook's solicitors. The heads of the firm conned over the sheet of paper and looked in one another's faces as who would say, "Here is a clue at last!"

"We had better let Mrs. Bladensbrook have a wire," said the senior partner to the junior.

"Yes, most decidedly. Shall I see to it?"

"I think you had better. The sooner she knows that there is a clue, the better for her."

"Shall I wire contents of the letter?"

"No, I don't think so. Say there is a clue which can only be followed up personally; letter following. And send her copy of this letter, and ask if we shall attend to it for her or would she prefer to come herself?"

Accordingly a telegram and letter were duly dispatched to Mrs. Bladensbrook, who was still detained in Geneva. She had been kept there for nearly a fortnight by the illness of the little heir; and as both mother and grandmother felt the stake in the little life was so great, they had delayed their journey home until he was really well rather than run the slightest risk of increasing his ailment. Mrs. Bladensbrook received the letter with considerable interest and eagerness, but Margot, after scanning its contents, laid it down with a disappointed expression. "I don't call that a clue," she said, quietly. "That is from the landlord of the hotel that we stayed at in Brixham. I knew at the time they didn't think I was Godfrey's wife. You see, I had one or two handkerchiefs marked M. D., and I saw the chambermaid look at one. They are so quick, these people, they notice everything. They can only tell you that we stayed there for a few days, and that I left the day before he did. They have told you that already."

"My dear, I think we had better follow it. This man implies that he has something else to tell."

"Ah, he wants to get us to go and stay a few days again," said Margot. "At all events, dear

Mother,"—she had long ago begun to call Mrs. Bladensbrook by the tender and homely name,—
"I wouldn't rush there, and don't let your hopes dwell too much upon it. I am sure it is no real clue and will tell us nothing definite about Godfrey. How should they know any better than I? And, really, Baby isn't fit to take such a long journey yet."

"Well, my dear, I will write to Woods and tell them to acknowledge the letter, and say that I will go and see Mr. Trimmings on my return to England. That will be the best way. I can then leave it open, and we can take an opportunity, when dear Baby is very well again, to make the journey home."

"Dear Baby," however, continued to show considerable signs of delicacy—well, that is to say, he was troubled with one childish ailment after another, infantile troubles that would not have seemed like troubles in an ordinary house or to an everyday family, but which to such an inexperienced mother as Margot, and to such an anxious grandmother as Mrs. Bladensbrook, took upon themselves the importance of serious and dangerous illnesses.

But in the beginning of August Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot were able to return to England and to make their way towards Brixham. For one thing, Margot was glad that they had been detained so long, because she knew Mrs. Blake would not be visible in Brixham in August, and she felt neither strong enough nor brave enough to

face the torrent of reproaches which she knew would be hers when she and that lady did happen to come together. Nancy and the nurse travelled in charge of the precious baby, putting up at the Mitre, at Marley Spa, the hotel where Godfrey was supposed to have stayed during the August of the previous year. From this house Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot went over to Brixham, going direct to the King's Arms Hotel, there to interview its proprietor, Mr. John Trimmings.

Miss Trimmings peeped out of the bar as the two ladies came into the hall, and seeing by the manner of the elder one that they were somebody of unusual importance, she came out of the little glazed hutch and advanced to meet them. "I have a letter here," began Mrs. Bladensbrook, "written by Mr. John Trimmings to my solicitors in London."

"Oh," said Miss Trimmings, "about Mr. William Smith?"

"Yes, about Mr. William Smith," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, feeling as if she were telling a lie.

"Will you come this way?" said Miss Trimmings. "If you will come into my father's private sitting-room, I will fetch him to you. He is not in the house, but he is close at hand." Then her eyes wandered from Mrs. Bladensbrook's face to that of her companion, and she recognized with a start that this was the young lady who had been their guest a year previously. "Good-morning, Mrs. Smith," she said, pleasantly.

"Good-morning," said Margot.

"I hope you are quite well," said Miss Trimmins.

"Quite well, thank you, said Margot. "I need hardly ask you the same question; you look extremely well."

"Yes, thank you, I am quite well," said Miss Trimmins. "This way." She opened the door of the little private room and ushered the two ladies into it. "Shall I say Mrs. William Smith?" said she, half hesitatingly.

"This is my mother-in-law," said Margot, feeling that the silence was awkward.

"Oh, really. Then I will say Mrs. Smith and Mrs. William Smith?"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, stiffening all over with indomitable pride. As the door closed behind Miss Trimmins, she turned sharply to Margot. "My dear child, don't you think I had better tell these people what our name is? It is dreadful to be going about as Smith."

"Well, yes, dear; but don't you think we had better hear all they have got to tell first? Because if they don't know much—only that we stayed here last year—they might as well not know that we are Bladensbrooks at all."

"Yes, you are quite right."

A few minutes later the door opened and the landlord of the hotel walked into the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

A TERRIBLE SHOCK.

"GOOD-MORNING, ladies!" he said. "I 'ope I see you well."

"Good-morning," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, with gracious dignity.

"Good-morning," said Margot, in her soft voice.

"You wrote me a letter—at least, you wrote a letter to my solicitors," Mrs. Bladensbrook began.

"I did, Ma'am, yes, I did. You see, I 'appened to see an advertisement in the paper—at least, my daughter did—about a young gentleman that stayed here last August, the young gentleman that this young lady was good lady to, if I mistake not?"

"You are quite right," said Margot.

"You can give me some information about this Mr. William Smith?"

"I can tell you what 'appened 'ere after the young lady left," said the landlord, sticking his thumb into his armhole and looking steadily at Mrs. Bladensbrook.

Mrs. Bladensbrook began to feel that after all the man did know something. She immediately sat down and rested her elbow and hand on the table. "Mr. Trimmings," she said, "I may as well tell you that I have never seen or heard of my son since the 19th of last August."

"That was the day on which it took place," said John Trimmings.

"The day on which what took place?"

"On which he left this house," said the landlord.

"Well, you will understand that I am exceedingly anxious, and my daughter-in-law likewise, to know where Mr. William Smith is."

"It wasn't 'is right name to begin with," said John Trimmings, deliberately.

"That is rather beside the question. It was the name under which you knew him."

"But it wasn't 'is right name for all that," said the landlord, calmly. "I said to my daughter at the time, and I said to her the other day when I wrote to your lawyers, that Mr. William Smith was no common man—he was a gentleman, and I 'ave never rightly settled in my mind that what 'appened 'ere on the 19th of last August came out right side uppermost."

"But what *did* happen?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook. She spoke with great patience, for she saw that the landlord was a garrulous person and must 'practically be left to tell his story in his own way.

"Well, Ma'am, the young lady left on Saturday morning and the young gentleman stayed the Saturday night 'ere by 'isself. On the Saturday night there was a bit of a rumpus—I cannot say quite what it was, for I wasn't present at the time—but there was a feller staying in the house that got a bit impudent or something, and your son put 'im out. Well, I spoke to 'im about it, and when he explained 'ow things 'ad been, I thanked 'im for

'aving taken a 'igh 'and in the matter, for I 'ave no fancy for my 'ouse being known for anything disreputable. Well, the next day, just when Mr. William Smith was leaving—he 'ad paid 'is bill and all—he was arrested."

"What!" cried Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"It is the plain truth, Ma'am. He was arrested."

"And for what?"

"He was arrested for theft."

"My son!"

"Mr. William Smith, that was the 'usband of this young lady, he was arrested for theft. He was charged by a visitor staying in the house with having stolen various articles of jewellery and some money. He offered to 'ave 'is things searched—well, of course, that made no difference, because the police were there and they would 'ave searched the boxes of a suspected party in any case, and the things was all found in 'is portmanteau in my entrance 'all, packed ready to go to the station. He was arrested; he asked for ten minutes alone with me, and the police knew me, and I said that it would be all right, and they allowed 'im to 'ave it. I was ten minutes alone in this room with 'im. He wrote a letter which 'e asked me to post without looking at the address, and I did so. I conclude it was the letter that was mentioned in the advertisement as having a Brixham post-mark. But I was true to my word, and I never looked at the direction at all. And then 'e got up and 'e said in 'is 'igh and 'aughty way, 'Now look here, landlord, you quite understand that there has been a mistake

here. I don't know yet what I shall do, but I shall thank you to speak of this to nobody.' He was committed for trial; he was tried at the county town assizes, and he was sentenced to 'eighteen months' hard labour."

"And you mean to tell me," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, staring at the landlord with a white set face, "that my son is in prison?"

"Your son, Ma'am, is in prison at this moment, if so be that he is alive. I can't say what prison, but that would be easy enough to find out from the officials at Chalkley."

"But," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, holding hard on to the table, and still fixing the landlord with a haggard gaze, "the whole thing is absurd. My son! Why, it is preposterous! My son has thirty thousand a year. Did he explain nothing? Were you at the trial?"

"I was, and he said nothing."

"He didn't explain his position? What defence did he make?"

"Well, Ma'am, practically 'e made no defence. 'E explained nothing about matters except that he was William Smith, of London."

"He quietly accepted the situation?"

"Well, practically, Ma'am, that was what 'e did. As to 'is 'aving thirty thousand a year or being in any way well off, he never breathed it. If 'e 'ad it might have put a different complexion on the whole case, but 'e shut 'is mouth like a steel gin and he said nothing at all. They couldn't drag a word out of 'im. And when the jedge giv 'im 'is sen-

tence, 'e just made 'im a little bow and 'e turned round and walked out of the dock without a word. I knew there was something wrong. I came 'ome and I said to Minnie, my daughter, 'That young feller never stole them diamonds, them studs, you know.' 'Well, Dad,' said she, 'what were they doing in 'is box?' 'I don't believe,' said I, 'that 'e put 'em there.' 'Well, then,' said she, 'who could or did, and why?' And there was reason in it, and it was no business of mine, and if I 'ad made it ever so much business of mine, I couldn't 'ave done anything, I was as 'elpless as the new-born babe. So I wondered a bit and I thought a bit more until the matter dropped, and then I see your advertisement."

"There has been some horrible mistake," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. In her horror at the news of Godfrey which had so unexpectedly come to her, she forgot even to feel a thrill, a tiny thrill of indignation, to hear this common man speak of him as a "young feller." For a few minutes none of the three broke the silence. The landlord, with his thumb still stuck in his armhole and his other hand thrust deep into his trouser pocket, stood gazing at Mrs. Bladensbrook. Mrs. Bladensbrook sat gripping the edge of the table and staring at the landlord's rubicund face as if she would fain gather more from there than he had already told her, then Margot created a diversion by slipping to the floor in a dead faint.

By dint of cold water, brandy, a fan, and the strongest of smelling salts, the landlord and Mrs.

Bladensbrook succeeded between them in bringing Margot back to her senses. "Come, come, my dear," said the older woman, "it has been an awful shock to you; I know by what I feel myself; but we mustn't give way, there is a great deal to be done. We have to discover the true thief, to establish Godfrey's innocence and to get him out of the place where he is now. We must not give way."

"No," said Margot, "I won't give way any more." But she closed her eyes, and but for a vigorous application of the salts would probably have slipped quietly off again. "No, I won't give way," she said, "I won't, really. But it was such a shock, such a revelation. Whatever will Aunt Marcia say if she finds out?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter what she says," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, contemptuously. "You and I have got sterner work to do than to worry about Aunt Marcia. Now, Mr. Trimmins," she added, having straightened Margot's hair and set her hat at its proper angle once more, "I have to thank you very very much for all your kindness to me. Later on—that is to say in a few days—I will send your daughter a little present to remember us by, and if I succeed in getting my son cleared of this ridiculous charge, I shall ask you to accept something much more substantial than what I shall send now. You have been exceedingly kind to me, and I thank you with all my heart."

"Well, I am sure, Ma'am," said John Trimmins, "I liked the gentleman and I liked the young lady, and it's dreadful to think of your having been

all this time in anxiety and trouble about 'im. 'E didn't look like anything of that kind, and I don't see—as long as 'e was right in 'is 'ead—why 'e should 'ave done it or be blamed for doing it, or why anybody should try to put such a suspicion upon 'im, I really don't. It is a mystery."

"Yes, it is a mystery," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "But you know, Mr. Trimmins, there is no mystery so deep but what some way can be found to unravel it. There is no mystery so mysterious but what there is some little thread which will make everything as clear as the light of day. If you knew my son as I know him, you would understand that it is quite an impossible thing that he should have taken those jewels; and I confess it seems impossible that anybody could be found in the world so malicious as to try to fasten such a dastardly crime upon him. Murder will out, Mr. Trimmins, and, although this is not murder, I feel perfectly sure that in this instance crime will out likewise."

"Well, Ma'am, I 'ope so with all my 'eart," said Mr. Trimmins, in his cheery, honest tones.

And then Mrs. Bladensbrook with the most unusual graciousness for her put out her hand and laid it in that of the rubicund Boniface with an air as if she were a sovereign bestowing the highest honour upon the humblest of her subjects. The landlord was duly impressed. "My," said he to his daughter later on, "but that *is* a grand lady, and no mistake about it! Lor' in my own house she made me feel that small and that 'umble I could scarcely believe it was myself standing there!"

Meantime, Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot were driving back to the station. Mrs. Bladensbrook had but scant mercy upon Margot's physical delicacy. She was sorry that she had fainted, but she thought it distinctly weak of her to do so at such a juncture. "Now, my dear," she said, as soon as they had driven well away from the hotel, "you must not allow yourself to give way. You and I have to go straight from here to Chalkley; we have to find out where Godfrey is; we must get an order to visit him; we shall not get at anything like the truth until we have seen him."

"But to see Godfrey in prison! Oh, Mrs. Bladensbrook! With his head cropped and the broad arrow stuck all over him—Oh, Mother, Mother, I shall never get over it!"

"Oh, yes, my dear, you will; you will get over it quite well. If Godfrey were justly in such a place, you never would be able to get over it; there would be no getting over such a situation on this side of the grave; but this is a mere bagatelle, an accident, a chance, a *contretemps*. You and I are as sure of Godfrey's innocence as we are of our own, so that it need not trouble us for a moment, beyond feeling vexation at the discomfort through which he has gone."

The lady was as good as her word. She whisked Margot into the train—which they just caught—she whisked her out at the other end when they reached the county town of Chalkley. "Now, my dear," she said, "do you think we had better have a cup of tea before we go up to the gaol?"

Margot's wan looks decided the question, and Mrs. Bladensbrook carried her off into the little refreshment room, where she administered to her very much after the manner of a nurse administering medicine to an unwilling child. Then she found a cab and they went up to the gaol together. Of course there was a difficulty—there is always a difficulty in surmounting any situation which is tinged with officialism. First of all, Mrs. Bladensbrook was told that she could not possibly see the Governor; it was not hours to see the Governor; he was probably not in his house, and he was sure to be engaged if he did happen to be at home. Mrs. Bladensbrook was, however, not a person who allowed herself to be put out of her way by trifles or petty obstacles. She did not on this account disdain the use of a silver key, and she carried her point sufficiently to drive in under the great gates and up to the house which was pointed out as the Governor's. The Governor's parlour-maid, being a person less open to suspicion than the gate porter, did not refuse her admittance or question her right of entry, and presently the Governor of the gaol, a tall, middle-aged man of military appearance, came to her, asking her what he could have the pleasure of doing for her. She saw that he recognized her quality at a glance, and to him she unfolded her tale, not, however, divulging her own name. "A young man was sentenced at the Chalkley Assizes last September to eighteen months' imprisonment for stealing jewellery and other effects

at an hotel at Brixham," she said. "I have only just discovered the facts of the case. That young man is my son. I am perfectly convinced that there is a mystery which can be unravelled and explained. It is preposterous and absurd to think that he should have soiled his hands for a moment with such a deed. He is very rich, and at the time of the alleged robbery he had been married three days. I want you to tell me where he is and advise me how I may best have an interview with him, also to tell me whether I can have an absolutely private interview?"

"Without any witnesses?" said the Governor.

"Yes."

"That, of course, is impossible except by breach of custom. What was your son's name?"

"He is called William Smith."

"Oh, Smith?"

"Yes."

"I confess I always had my doubts about his case."

"You had? Why?"

"Why, because he is a gentleman and he looks honest. The governor of a gaol usually knows the true character of every person under his charge."

"And is my son here now?"

"Yes. Men under sentences no longer than his are not taken to the great penal establishments, but work out their time in the county gaols where they have been sentenced. I could let you see your son, certainly, but not alone. If you will come this way, you shall see him in five minutes."

"Oh, you are very good," replied Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"Not at all, not at all. I would do more than that for a well-behaved prisoner, to say nothing of being willing to oblige a mother, more especially when she happens to be a woman of your evident standing. And this young lady?" with a gesture towards Margot.

"Is my son's wife."

"Oh, really! Well, come this way. You shall see him."

They were led down several long passages through heavily-barred doors and gateways, and then they were shown into a small room divided in the middle by a double trellis-work of iron. There the Governor left them. In less than five minutes the door of the other compartment to that in which they stood was flung open and Godfrey Bladensbrook, cropped as to the head and clad in hideous prison garments, walked into the room. A turnkey immediately appeared in the division between the two barriers of trellis-work. Mrs. Bladensbrook ran close up to the barrier and said in a palpitating voice—"Godfrey!"

He cast one glance at her, then turned sharply to the warder. "This lady," he said, "has made a mistake. I don't know her."

"Godfrey!" cried Margot.

But Godfrey never turned. "I don't know these ladies," he said, in a deliberate voice. "They are making a mistake. I am not the person they seek."

CHAPTER XXXI.

CAUGHT RED-HANDED.

WHEN the door had closed behind Godfrey Bladensbrook, and the turnkey had disappeared from the gangway between the two compartments of the room, Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot turned and looked at one another. Margot was trembling violently from head to foot, her face white, drawn, and quivering, her eyes staring as if they would start out of their sockets. This phase did not, however, last for more than a few seconds. With a cry she sprang to her mother-in-law and hid her face upon her breast, but Mrs. Bladensbrook never lost her presence of mind for a single instant. She soothed the girl very tenderly ; but at the same time whispered words bidding her bear up and not show the state of agitation she was in. "Come, come," she said, "you must dry your eyes ; you must pull down your veil and go out as if nothing had happened, as if we had made a mistake. Godfrey has a good reason ; he looked right into my eyes, and I saw nothing there to be ashamed of. He knows what he is doing ; he is doing it for the best. We must fall in with his evident desires. Come, my dear, it is only a few months more and then everything will be explained to us. I shall tell the Governor that his prisoner is quite right and we have made a mistake."

"But it *is* Godfrey," said Margot, with a wail of despair.

"Yes, my dear, of course it is Godfrey; but Godfrey wishes us not to reveal his name and identity. He is here as William Smith, and depend upon it he has a good reason for what he is doing. You and I must not be the ones to betray him. Come, brace yourself up; nerve yourself; shake yourself together, Margot. Your husband's whole future depends upon it."

By the dint of alternate warnings and coaxings she succeeded in so bracing Margot to action that she dried her eyes, drew down her veil, and straightened herself generally. "I am quite ready, if you don't expect me to talk," she said. "I—I—cannot talk And I can't help shaking."

"Leave it all to me," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Don't utter a word. I will tell the Governor that you are naturally very much upset and to a certain extent relieved to find that your husband is not here. It isn't true; but still Godfrey must have a good reason——Hush! Here is the warder."

"The other warder tells me, Madam, that the prisoner says you have made a mistake?"

"That is quite true," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, speaking with the utmost dignity and graciousness. "I was, of course, deceived by the similarity of name. I am sorry to have given you so much trouble. Perhaps you will present my compliments to the Governor, and thank him for allowing me to satisfy myself?" She pressed a handsome *douceur* into his hand and sailed out into the dreary corridor

again, drawing Margot with her by the hand. "Come, my dear child," she said to her, "we will get out of this dreadful place. You know," speaking very graciously to the warder, "it is a dreadful place to us. We are not used to prisons. My daughter-in-law is a little overcome by this interview and the shock of it all. You will make my apologies to the Governor, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, Madam; in fact, I think the Governor has gone out."

"Thank you so much," and she half lifted, half hurried Margot into the cab, and told the warder to tell the cabman to drive back to the station. Not until they were once more safely in the train did Margot speak again—I should say speak again on the subject which was lying so near to both of their hearts. "Oh, dear Mother, *what* can this mystery be? It was Godfrey—Godfrey, that object, degraded, shamed like that, with his head—ugh! horrid—horrid—and those dreadful clothes on."

"My dear child, what do clothes matter? And as for his head, the hair will grow again in a few weeks. As for the shame and the degradation—well, I cannot make it out; but Godfrey never stole—oh, it is too ridiculous. It is absurd for you and me to discuss it, to question it, to trouble ourselves about it. There has been a mistake, and Godfrey has his reasons for what he is doing—urgent reasons; that goes without saying."

"What are we to do now?" Margot asked.

"My dear child, there is nothing for us to do

but to go back to Marley Spa, eat our dinner, spend the night, and get home to Bladensbrook as quickly as we reasonably can do. We are better there; the place must be looking lovely. We are satisfied as to where Godfrey is, and we must make up our minds to wait his time; we can wait better in Bladensbrook than anywhere else; besides that, it would be so good for the child; among our own people, with every possible plans for his comfort and well-being, he will thrive there as he would do nowhere in hotels."

"And I—we shall not know till next March," said Margot, with a pitiful sigh.

"My dear, anything may happen between this and next March; it is a long time to wait. One never knows what a day may bring forth, nor how soon this mystery may be elucidated. At all events, to me the satisfaction of knowing that Godfrey is alive and in good health has outweighed everything for the moment; for the rest, I trust him as absolutely as I have trusted him all his life, and I am quite content to wait his time for being able to tell me the why and the wherefore of the whole extraordinary incident. Of course, now that your marriage and Baby's birth have been announced, there need be no hesitation about our going back to Bladensbrook."

"It will be very dreadful," said Margot.

"Oh, yes, my dear; there are many dreadful things in this life through which we must go cheerfully and uncomplainingly, showing only a brave front to the world; that is our portion. Now, I

wish for your sake that you were going back to your husband and to take your own place; but you young people acted for the best, or as you thought was for the best, and it is no use now repining or looking back over what is unalterable."

But nevertheless to Margot the home-coming to Bladensbrook was wholly and entirely painful. If it had been to a strange place, to the home of her husband which she had never seen, she fancied she would not have felt it half so deeply, but to go where every villager knew her, knew a part at least of the strange story, where people were still conjecturing as to where Godfrey Bladensbrook, the squire, could possibly be, and why he was keeping so persistently out of sight, to go back to meet the man who had proposed to her, to meet all the people who had known her all her life and who many of them looked as if they believed that Godfrey had kept out of sight through some dissatisfaction with her, it was a dreadful trial. But Mrs. Bladensbrook was indomitable. She went home speaking of "my daughter-in-law" and of "my grandson" as if they were accepted facts of years' standing, and at last, when somebody ventured to ask her very diffidently whether they had any news of Godfrey, she answered in the most airy manner, "Oh, dear, yes! My son will be home very shortly." But somehow nobody liked to ask any further questions, and the neighbourhood of Bladensbrook was more mystified than ever. To nobody but the Rector did Mrs. Bladensbrook vouchsafe anything like an explanation.

"My dear Rector," she said, when he gave vent to a similar enquiry, "I really can tell you very little. Margot is Godfrey's wife, and Godfrey has been engaged in some most important and intricate business. I can explain nothing of it to you; but he will be home in the spring, and then you will hear what he says himself."

At this time Margot's nurse left them and was replaced by a very dignified personage who took up her abode at Bladensbrook on a more permanent basis than anyone belonging to an institution was capable of doing. From the very first the air of Bladensbrook seemed to suit the little heir; he grew and thrived like a young plant, doing much to fill up that great empty space in Margot's heart, and to make his grandmother content to wait until blustering March should bring back her son to give what explanation he would of the strange events of the past eighteen months. They were not so cut off from the world as Mrs. Bladensbrook had been during the first six months of Godfrey's absence. She conceived it to be her duty to go back to her ordinary life, and she visited in a stately fashion among her neighbours, giving dinner-parties now and again, and became quite her own vigorous queenly self.

It was during this time that the head-keeper at Bladensbrook came up to the house one morning and asked to see the mistress. He was shown into the study, which was a little room where Mrs. Bladensbrook invariably conducted all business connected with the estate, and there Mrs. Bladens-

brook joined him. "Well, Walters," she said, "what is it?"

"Excuse me, Madam," said Walters, making his obeisance and standing up, looking very straight and tall in his picturesque brown velveteen garments, "but I happen to have found out that I was right in my suspicions about young Daniels."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Yes, Madam, that is so. I have got the best of evidence agen him, and I think we shall nab my gentleman red-handed to-night."

"I scarcely believe it, Walters," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, in her calm, equable tones.

"Well, Madam, that is as time and chance will show. I thought it my duty to come up and warn you, my lady, that we are on the track. A deal of game is being snared the last few weeks; we have been on the track day and night as you may say, and from information I have received I think we ought to land the gentleman to-night."

"Very well, Walters; if you land him fairly and, as you say, red-handed, I will acknowledge that I was wrong, but until you do so I must say that I have every faith in young Daniels."

"Very good, Madam." He then consulted her on one or two other points connected with the shootings, and disappeared when by a gesture she dismissed him.

Mrs. Bladensbrook sat for some little time in the large chair by the fire thinking deeply. "I cannot think," her thoughts ran, "that I can be so deceived in young Daniels. No, I won't believe it until I

have no choice but to do so. If there is anything in physiognomy, that young man is as straight as a die, and I have believed in physiognomy all my life. A man who can look you straight in the eyes and answer you without hesitation or a stumble, a man who walks well with his feet to right and left, that man is seldom dishonest. It is against nature even to suspect him. However, of course, the game has been taken, and Walters is perfectly right to try to trap this poacher—still, I cannot think that young Daniels is the man.” She got up at last with an impatient sigh, knowing that if she sat there till night her cogitations would not make the smallest difference in the actuality of the events which would come to pass during the next twenty-four hours. She went back to her occupation of writing important letters and the incident passed almost out of her mind.

She and Margot had lunch together and the little heir was brought down by his nurse for half an hour while they had their coffee, then she and Margot went out together in the open carriage. They had rather a long drive that day, for their errand was to go to see a lady recovering from a somewhat severe illness, a lady who had always been a friend of Mrs. Bladensbrook’s, and who was as near to an intimate as she possessed in the world. “Nobody would believe that we were almost upon Christmas,” she said, as they drove back through the fast darkening country lanes.

“No, it is quite mild,” said Margot. “Did you notice those curious red things—half flowers, half

berries—that Lady Constance had on her table? I never saw anything so curious in my life. And how they lighted up that part of the room?”

“I did notice them. I meant to ask her where they had come from, and then something she said put it out of my mind. By the bye, how dreadful Miss Drummond looked. What was it?”

“I think it was her hat,” said Margot.

“But what was her hat?”

“Ah, that is more than I can tell you. It was very queer, and she did look so satisfied with it——”

“Stop!” said Mrs. Bladensbrook imperatively to the coachman at that moment. They were still a good nine miles from home, and, as the carriage drew up with a jerk, a tall figure stopped, turned and came back to the door on Mrs. Bladensbrook’s side. “Is that you, Daniels?” she asked, sharply.

“Yes, my lady.”

“Oh, where are you going?”

“I am going into Eccrington, my lady.”

“Shall you be long before you return?”

“Well, my lady, I was not coming back very early,” the young man replied. “The fact is, I am going to see some cousins, and they have got a bit of a merry-making on. I don’t intend to be back much before midnight. Is there anything I can do for you, my lady?”

“No, thank you—no, it doesn’t matter. I wanted to know where you were going, that was all. Good-night.”

“Good-night, my lady.” He stood and looked after the carriage with its champing horses and

flashing lights. "Now, I wonder what made her ask me that?" he said to himself. "Why should she want to know where I was going and how long I was going to stop?"

At that very moment Margot was asking Mrs. Bladensbrook the same question. "Why did you want to know where young Daniels was going?" she enquired.

"I had a reason," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, who seldom made explanations needlessly.

They were some time before they reached home, which they did in time to dress for dinner. They were quite alone that evening, but they were not dull; they were never dull together, for Mrs. Bladensbrook was at all times a most entertaining companion. When the clock struck ten, however, and Matthew appeared bringing in a small table with a silver tray and a liqueur-stand, Mrs. Bladensbrook looked up with a start. "How the evening has slipped away!" she said. "I feel as if it was not half an hour since dinner. Matthew, what is that?"

"I will see, M'm," said Matthew.

It was somebody at the principal entrance-door, somebody who knocked imperatively. In a few minutes Matthew came back again, showing in the Rector. "My dear Rector, is anything the matter?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook, as soon as she had glanced at his face.

"Something very dreadful has happened," he said. "I really hardly know how to tell you the news. There has been a poaching affray in the woods just back of the house and a man has been shot, Mrs.

Bladensbrook. It is a mile to the village, and he is a dying man. I have told them to bring him in here—I felt that you would not mind. All the village people are in bed long ago. I hope you don't mind."

"My dear Rector, of course not. But who has been shot? Not one of my men, I hope."

"I don't know. He didn't give his name, but he is dying, and he has asked to see a magistrate. He has something of importance to tell him."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MY SON HAS MORE THAN SATISFIED ME!

IN a moment Mrs. Bladensbrook had rung the bell for Matthews, by whom she sent instructions to the housekeeper to make ready a room immediately in which the dying man could be received. In answer to this message the housekeeper herself came hurriedly to her mistress. "Don't you think, Ma'am, that the little blue room would do quite well? It is conveniently near the stairs leading to our passage, and can be ready in ten minutes."

"I do, certainly, Mrs. Moore. Have a fire lighted and do everything that is necessary. Although the man has been taken red-handed snaring our game, Mr. Morris, he is dying, and of course death wipes out all scores. Let him have every atten-

tion that is necessary. I suppose," turning to the Rector, "that you have sent for the doctor?"

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Bladensbrook, the doctor is with him now. It will be a question of a very few hours. One of the under-keepers has gone for the nearest magistrate—that, by the bye, is Mr. Bulmore."

"Oh, yes. Well, I hope he will come in time. Of course, you will not expect me to see him?"

"Oh, I don't think so; I don't think it is at all necessary. Mrs. Moore and I and the doctor can do everything that is needful."

"Then Margot and I will sit here until we know that the man is safely in bed. You might let us have the news. You will stay here to-night, I suppose?"

"I will not leave him," said the Rector; "the whole thing is very dreadful—to be taken red-handed like this, the work of weeks, and after trying very hard to compromise another man, an innocent man. I could not leave such a case at all."

"Then you will consider this your house, my dear Rector. Anything that you order, Mrs. Moore and Matthew will supply you with. Matthew, you will remain within call of the Rector to-night."

"Oh, yes, M'm, yes. I shall not dream of going to bed."

The Rector then went out of the room and passed out to the great entrance steps to listen whether the men were approaching with their burden. They came presently, carrying the wounded man upon a hurdle, upon which a few coats and rugs had been

hurriedly thrown. There was no question of being able to carry their burden straight up-stairs, and they took him up the great staircase and along the wide corridor until they came to the door which led into the bachelor quarters of the house. There they laid the hurdle down upon the floor and, lifting him as gently as they could, carried him by hand into the room which had been prepared for him. Matthew came down presently to tell Mrs. Bladensbrook that the move had been safely accomplished. "He is very ill, M'm; a wretched-looking creature, quite a stranger. Nobody seems to know anything about him. He says he has been living in the woods and feeding himself on what he could get, and by his looks he is a regular gaol-bird."

Well, it is no use spinning out this part of the story. During the solemn watches of that night the spirit of the wounded stranger fled, and all that was left of him lay clothed in the majesty of death under the roof of the woman he had robbed. Somehow, Mrs. Bladensbrook never dreamed of going to sleep, or of going to bed, even. She sat up in the little drawing-room thinking deeply. Twice she urged Margot to go to bed, but Margot said that if she did she could not sleep, and so the two women kept their vigil together. It was almost morning when the Rector came back and told them that all was over.

"It is the most extraordinary story," he said, "that he has told the magistrate that I have ever heard. His has been a singular life; he was not a common man, but fairly educated and quite of the

middle class. He has left not only a confession of having for weeks past snared your game, but also of his having tried to cast the blame upon another, a young man who offended him some little time ago by refusing to become in any sense his friend."

"That was young Daniels, of course," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "Ah, well, Margot and I met him to-night, nine miles away, footing it steadily in the direction of Eccrington. I stopped the carriage and asked him where he was going, and he said to some cousins who were merry-making, and that he would not be back until midnight, so that I knew that he meant to have no hand in this night's work, although Walters was convinced that Daniels was the poacher after whom he was so keenly searching. I never believed that he would take a feather from me."

"Well, his innocence is established now. But that is not the only confession that this wretched fellow had to make. It seems that last year he deliberately put the blame of a theft on to a man who was absolutely innocent. This man, whom he described to me as a howling swell, was staying in an hotel in a manufacturing town—Oh, I forget the name—and he seems to have snubbed his advances, and to have told him flatly that he would not associate with him in any way. It seems that he deliberately stole some jewels from a gentleman staying in the hotel and introduced them into this man's portmanteau. He was arrested—but, Mrs. Bladensbrook, you seem very much interested!"

"It is an interesting story," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, breathlessly. "Go on!"

"Well, this man was arrested, as it were taken red-handed, tried, and sentenced to hard labour for eighteen months. He has been serving that sentence ever since."

"And his name?" said Mrs. Bladensbrook.

"His name!" breathed Margot, scarcely above a whisper.

"I don't think anybody you know," said the Rector. "The name he gave in the deposition is a very common one—it is William Smith."

For the third time in her life Margot quietly fainted away. Mrs. Bladensbrook took no more notice of the girl than if she had sighed in her sleep. "What will be done with that deposition?" she asked.

"That, of course, will be sent to the proper authorities; the Home Secretary will be communicated with, and the unfortunate William Smith will have a free pardon."

"You are sure of that?"

"Oh, certain."

Mrs. Bladensbrook gave a deep sigh of relief. "I am very glad that this wretch had the grace to make a clean breast of it before he was taken. Think what that poor thing has suffered, knowing his own innocence; think what his mother must have borne!"

"Well, well," said the Rector, "we must leave all that. After all, his people can only be thankful that reparation has been done, although it is

late in the day; but," turning his head suddenly and seeing Margot's senseless condition, "Mrs. Bladensbrook, your daughter-in-law!"

"Oh, dear, dear! Poor child! This has been too much for her. Where is Matthew? Matthew, get a little brandy; Mrs. Godfrey has fainted."

* * * * *

A few days later Mrs. Bladensbrook and Margot were comfortably ensconced in a well-known London hotel. To say that they were anxious is to express nothing of the tumult of feelings, hope, fear, doubt, expectation, delirious joy, anxiety, all combined, which filled their hearts, for they were expecting Godfrey! Every moment that passed brought him nearer, every tick of the little clock upon the mantel-shelf brought the period of separation nearer to its close. At last, Margot, who was standing by the window, turned round in her excitement. "Mother," she said, "*I cannot* wait here any longer. I believe he is just coming. I would rather leave you to see him first. After all, he did write to me twice. It is your due that you should see him first."

"Oh, my dear," said the mother.

"Yes, I wish it so. He would rather explain to you than to me. He made his last appointment with you. I will come when you send for me."

She whisked out of the room and Mrs. Bladensbrook went impatiently to the window, where she stood tapping her fingers restlessly upon the

pane and looking up and down the street as if by oft looking she could bring her son more quickly. And at last he came—a Godfrey that she scarcely knew, a Godfrey with his hair still painfully short, but a well-dressed, well-groomed, well-turned-out Godfrey of whom no mother could be ashamed.

“My boy!” she cried, and the next moment she was in his arms.

She was not a demonstrative and foolish mother, her raptures did not last long ere she held him at arm’s length and asked him a question. “Now tell me, why did you deny us when we came to see you?”

“Why?” he said, very tenderly, “because, when that awful suspicion came upon me, that suspicion, Mother, under which I should have believed any other man in the world to be guilty, that suspicion from which I could never hope that my bare word or even my position would save me, I felt that it was only due to myself and to you—to my race—to my regiment, to let things pass as they would without explanation. It seemed to me that an explanation would only serve to tarnish the name of Bladensbrook. After all, there is no record of a Bladensbrook having suffered imprisonment for the low crime of theft; there is no record concerning any person but William Smith,—*that* could hurt nobody. It seemed to me that I was in for a bad piece of luck, and that, try as I would, I could only get through it by endurance, so when you came—you and Margot

—so unexpectedly to see me, I had not a moment to think in, not a moment for preparation. I didn't know what to do, and then it came to me that you would understand that if I denied you, I should not do so without a reason."

"I *did* understand you," said Mrs. Bladensbrook. "I told Margot that I was satisfied you had a reason, and a good reason."

"And Margot, where is she? Mother, you don't know everything."

"My dear boy," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, "I told Woods to say nothing to you. I have known everything for a long time. It is you, dear, who are in the dark; it is you who don't know everything yet."

"And Margot?"

"Margot knows all that has happened—everything that has happened," said his mother, "everything. She was here in this room five minutes ago; she was so nervous, and she fancied I ought to see you first, but she is waiting to be sent for."

"Margot is in this house?"

"Yes. I will send for her now." She went across the room to ring the bell, perhaps for the first time that she had ever done such a service for her son. "Go and ask Mrs. Godfrey Bladensbrook to come here," she said to the man who answered the summons.

"It sounds so strange to hear Margot called Mrs. Godfrey Bladensbrook!" said he, taking hold of his mother's hand and smiling down upon her.

"Margot is quite used to it," said Mrs. Bladensbrook the elder. "Ah, here she is! Margot—he is come."

"Godfrey!" cried Margot. And that was all. There were no explanations; she asked none, he gave none; his arms were about her, hers about him. "Godfrey!" was all that she could find to say. But by and by, when the two had calmed down, a recollection came back to Margot of something that she had to tell Godfrey. "Dear Godfrey," she said, looking up at him and holding his great hand closely between her two little snowflakes, "we have so much to tell you, your mother and I, we don't know where to begin—at least, we know where to begin, but we shall not know where to go on after that. You haven't told him yet, Mother?"

"I haven't told him one word," said Mrs. Bladensbrook, smiling.

"Told me about what?" asked Godfrey.

"Ah, we have a little surprise for you—your mother and I. We have something to show you." Then she too jumped up and flitted across the room to ring the bell. "You must sit still, Godfrey; don't listen to what I am going to say." She went to the door and whispered something to the waiter, who promptly disappeared. "Sit quite still, Godfrey; look at the fire—don't turn your head—don't try to listen."

"I won't," said Godfrey.

And then there was a silence.

"Now you may look round," said Margot.

And when Godfrey looked round he saw his wife, with a beautiful blooming babe in her arms, smiling at him over a little golden downy head, with a new light in her eyes which he had never seen there before.

* * * * * * *

Two months later, the squire, with his wife and son, accompanied by her who had for so many years been queen regent of Bladensbrook, returned home. Nobody liked to ask him where he had been, and Godfrey volunteered no information; but at last one venturesome lady put a question to Mrs. Bladensbrook the elder. Her answer was characteristic and at the same time politely crushing. "My son," she said, "has been in very strange places. A most curious accident befell him which prevented him from communicating with us for some little time."

"Is he going to stay at home now?" asked the questioning lady.

"Oh, yes. He will not go away again. There will be no need. What? Did I mind Godfrey's being away so long? Well, neither his wife nor I liked it; but he thought it necessary, and she and I had no choice but to acquiesce in his absence. As for his motives, well, it isn't for me to talk about them, but I may tell you that my son has always *more* than satisfied me!"

THE END.

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